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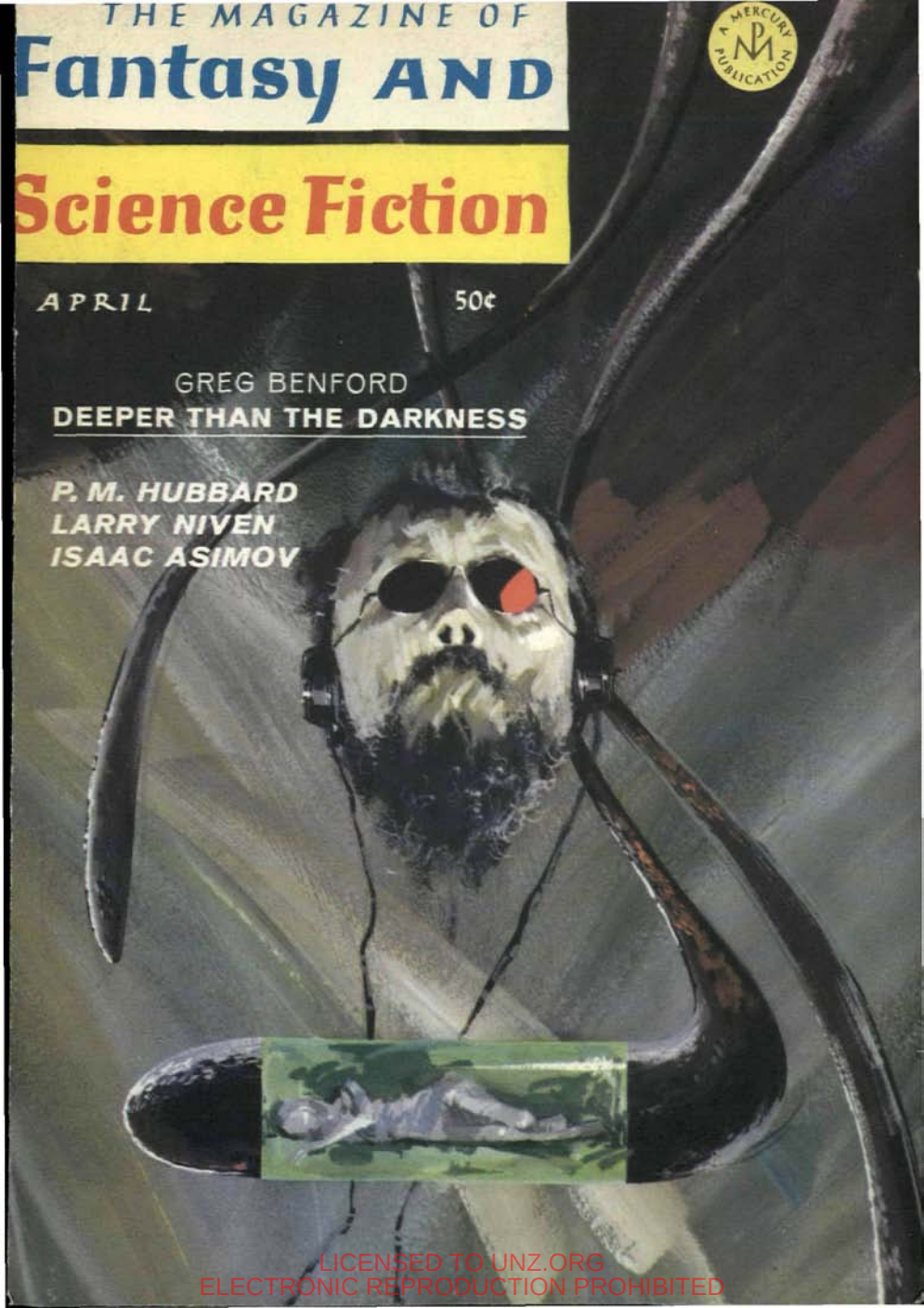
GREG BENFORD
DEEPER THAN THE DARKNESS

P. M. HUBBARD
LARRY NIVEN
ISAAC ASIMOV



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

APRIL

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One of the impressive things about this story is that it develops a fresh, convincing and terrifying alien menace; and not much sf even makes the attempt these days. The story is about a transport ship that is sent to pick up the survivors of an alien attack. The crew is a microcosm of a society that has emphasized the virtue of community to the point where mankind has become like an interdependent organism, an organism susceptible to contagious disease . . .

DEEPER THAN THE DARKNESS

by Greg Benford

IT WAS ABOUT AN HOUR INTO morning shift. I was planning out my day. I had to arrange the routing work I could do over the screen so that it didn't conflict with the eating routine, the kids' use of the screen for school hours, and the best times to go for a walk through the tubes.

The kids were pouting for some reason, and I was having trouble concentrating on the changes that had been made in the production schemes since yesterday. If you don't get the changes down pat in the morning, you'll be sending new goods to depots that don't handle that product any more and the losses can eat up your day's management commission before complaint feedback reaches you.

I'd just about gotten it down when it was time for the kids' first sight-lecture, and I had to give up the screen. I settled down in the dining booth to review my notes, but it wasn't ten minutes before they started whining.

"*Dad*-dy, why do we have to watch this old stuff?" Romana said, jerking her chin up with a regal look. "None of the other cubes in this block even *carry* Schoolchannel any more."

"Uh," said Chark, "and it's *boring*. Everybody knows you can't learn fast without tapping. We're going to turn out to be rennies."

"Rennies?"

"Renegades," Angela said from the kitchen cloister. "It's new slang. You should watch the entertainment channel more." The words were normal but her tone had an edge on it. She'd tried the manual breakfast this morning,

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and it hadn't worked out, but indocing—or was that out-dated term still around?—was one of our flash points. She stood in the doorway and looked at me with her mouth tightened.

"Don't you think it's about time you started to listen to what other people think, Sanjen? Finally?"

"No." I looked away and started underlining some parts of my notes. Chark dialed the volume down on the screen, and the room fell silent. I wasn't going to get away with a light dismissal.

"*Dad*-dy . . . ."

"If you'd just read some of the articles we gave you," Chark began in a measured, reasonable tone, "and talked to a counselor at the Center, you'd understand why we need tapping now. You were out there yourself, Dad, so . . ."

"Yes," I said sharply. "I was out there. And none of you were. You believe anything the Assembly says is good for the common defense, but don't expect me . . ."

I stopped. It wasn't going to do any good. I wouldn't tell them the guts of what happened out there —that was buried away in a file somewhere with red Secret stickers all over it, and until the stickers came off I couldn't say anything.

Angela broke her rigid silence, and I could tell from the way she said it that it had been held back for a long time. "Why do you tell them such things? They'll respect you even less if you try to pretend there's some big mystery about what you did out there. You were just a shuttle captain, a pickup convoy to get the survivors off Regeln after the Quarm hit it. And you didn't even get many off, either."

"Something happened. Something really happened."

The children had gotten quiet, the way they do when they sense that the grownups have forgotten they're around, and maybe a fight was going to start. Angela and I both noticed it at the same time.

"All right. We'll talk about it later," I said. The kids went back to their lecture, grumbling to each other, and Angela walked into the bedroom, probably to pout. It was one more nick in a marriage that was already eroding.

We would talk later, and there would be accusations and complaints, and I couldn't solve them; I couldn't explain.

But it happened. It caught me in a wave of hard color, a menace, subtle and faceless, and the wave threw me up on this barren spiritual shore. To wait, and while waiting to die. It happened during that quick run to drop into the Regeln system and grab whatever was left before the Quarm returned.

The crew didn't take it well. Fleet took us off a routine run and

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outfitted the ships with enough extras to put the convoy on the lowest rung of warship class. But men take time to adjust. Most of them were still nervous and edgy about the changes that had been made. They were suddenly *oraku*, warrior status. They didn't like it—neither did I—but there was nothing to be done. It was an emergency.

I had us roar out of port at full bore, giving the ships that hot gun-metal smell, and that kept them busy for a while. But maintenance is maintenance, and soon they found the time to tie themselves in knots, wringing out self-doubts with fidgeting fingers. In a few days the results began to come up through the confessional rings: anxieties, exclusion feelings, loss of phase.

"I told Fleet we'd have this," I said to Tonji, my Exec. "These men can't take a sudden change of status and role." I let go of the clipboard that held the daily report and watched it strike the table top with a slow-motion clatter in low gee.

Tonji blinked his simian eyes languidly, thinking. "I think they are over-reacting to the danger involved. None of us signed for this. Give them time."

"Time? Where am I going to get it? We're only weeks out of Regeln now. This is a large group, spread over a convoy. We'll have to reach them quickly."

He unconsciously stiffened his lips, a gesture he probably associated with being tough-minded. "It will take effort, it's true. But I suppose you realize there isn't any choice."

Was that a hint of defiance in his voice, mingled with his habitual condescension? I paused, let it go. "More Sabal, then. Require senior officers to attend as well."

"You're sure that's enough, sir?"

"Of course I'm sure! I haven't got all the answers in my pocket. This convoy hasn't had anything but shuttle jobs for years."

"But we've been reassigned . . ."

"Slapping a sticker on a ship doesn't change the men inside. The crews don't know what to do. There isn't any confidence in the group, because everyone can sense the uncertainty. Nobody knows what's waiting for us on Regeln. A crewman wouldn't be human if he didn't worry about it."

I looked across the small cabin at my kensdai altar. I knew I was losing control of myself too often and not directing the conversation the way I wanted. I focused on the solid, dark finish of the wood that framed the altar, feeling myself merge with the familiarity of it. Focus down, let the center flow outward.

Tonji flicked an appraising glance at me. "The Quarm were stopped on Regeln. That's why we're going."

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"They'll be back. The colony there beat them off, but took a lot of losses. It's now been twenty-four days since the Quarm left. You've heard the signals from the surface—they're the only ones we got after their satellite link was destroyed. The correct code grouping is there, but the signal strength is down and transmission faded. Whoever sent them was working in bad conditions, or didn't understand the gear, or both."

"Fleet doesn't think it's a trap?" Tonji's features, Mongol-yellow in the diffused light of my cabin, took on a cool, sly look.

"They don't know. I don't either. But we need information on Quarm tactics and equipment. They're a race of hermits, individuals, but somehow they cooperate against us. We want to get an idea how."

"The earlier incidents . . ."

"They were just that—incidents. Raids. Fleet never got enough coherent information out of the surviving tapes, and what there was they can't unravel. There were no survivors."

"But this time the colonists stood off a concentrated attack."

"Yes. Perhaps there are good records on Regeln."

Tonji nodded, smiling, and left after proper ceremonies. I was sure he knew everything I'd told him, but he'd seemed to want to draw the details out of me, to savor them.

For the better the mission, the gaudier the reports, then all the faster would rise the fortunes of Mr. Tonji. A war—the first in over a century, and the first in deep space—has the effect of opening the staircases to the top. It relieves a young officer of the necessity for worming his way through the hierarchy.

I reached out, dialed a star-chart of Regeln's neighbors, studied.

The Quarm had been an insect buzzing just beyond the range of hearing for decades now. Occasional glancing contacts, rumors, stories. Then war.

How? Security didn't bother to tell lowly convoy captains—probably only a few hundred men anywhere knew. But there had been a cautiously worded bulletin about negotiations in the Quarm home worlds, just before the War. The Council had tried to establish communal rapport with some segment of Quarm society. It had worked before, with the Phalanx and Angras.

Among the intellectual circles I knew—such as they were—it was holy dogma. Sense of community was the glue that held a culture together. Given time and correct phase it could bind even alien societies. In two cases it already had.

And it wove a universe for us. A world of soft dissonances muted into harmonies, tranquil hues of water prints fading together.

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To it, the Quarm were a violent slash of strangeness. Hermit-like, they offered little and accepted less. Privacy extended to everything for them; we still had no clear idea of their physical appearances. Their meetings with us had been conducted with only a few individual negotiators.

Into this the Council had moved. Perhaps a taboo was ignored, a trifle overlooked. The mistake was too great for the Quarm to pass; they came punching and jabbing into the edge of the human community. Regeln was one of their first targets.

"First Sabal call," Tonji's voice came over the inboard. "You asked me to remind you, sir."

It was ironic that Tonji, with all his ancestors citizens of Old Nippon, should be calling a Sabal game to be led by me, a half-breed Caucasian—and I was sure it wasn't totally lost on him. My mother was a Polynesian and my father a truly rare specimen: one of the last pure Americans, born of the descendants of the few who had survived the Riot War. That placed me far down in the caste lots, even below Australians.

When I was a teenager it was still socially permissible to call us *ofkaipan*, a term roughly analogous to *nigger* in the early days of the American Republic. But since then had come the Edicts of Harmony. I imagine the Edicts are still ignored in the off-islands, but with my professional status it would be a grave breach of protocol if the word ever reached my ears. I'd *seen* it often enough, mouthed wordlessly by an orderlyman who'd just received punishment, or an officer who couldn't forget the color of my skin. But never aloud.

I sighed and got up, almost wishing there were another of us aboard, so I wouldn't have moments of complete loneliness like this. But we were rare in Fleet, and almost extinct on Earth itself.

I uncased my formal Sabal robes and admired their delicate sheen a moment before putting them on. The subtle reds and violets caught the eye and played tricks with vision. They were the usual lint-free polyester that shed no fine particles into the ship's air, but everything possible had been done to give them texture and depth beyond the ordinary uniform. They were part of the show, just like the bals and chants.

During the dressing, I made the ritual passes as my hands chanced to pass diagonally across my body, to induce emotions of wholeness, peace. The vague fears I had let slip into my thoughts would be in the minds of the crew as well.

The murmur in our assembly-room slackened as I appeared; I greeted them, took my place in the hexagon of men and began the abdominal exercises, sitting erect. I breathed deeply, slowly, and

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made hand passes. At the top of the last arc the power was with me and, breathing out, I came *down* into focus, outward-feeling, *kodakani.*

I slowed the juggling of the gamebals, sensing the mood of the hexagon. The bals and beads caught the light in their counter cadences, glancing tones of red and blue off the walls as they tumbled. The familiar dance calmed us, and we moved our legs to counterposition, for meditation.

My sing-chant faded slowly in the softened acoustics of the room. I began the Game.

First draw was across the figure, a crewman fidgeting with his Sabal leafs. He chose a passage from the Quest and presented it as overture. It was a complex beginning—the Courier was endowed with subtleties of character and mission. Play moved on. The outline of our problem was inked in by the others as they read their own quotations from the leaves into the Game structure.

For the Royal Courier rode down the hills, and being he of thirst, hunger and weariness, he sought aid in the town. Such was his Mission that the opinion he gained here of the inhabitants of the village, their customs, honesty and justice (not only to the Courier, but to themselves) would be relayed to the Royal Presence as well. And thence, it is said, to Heaven. Having such items to barter, he went from house to house . . .

After most entries were made, the problem maze established had dark undertones of fear and dread. As expected.

I repeated the ritual of beads. And rippling them slowly through my fingers, began the second portion of Sabal: proposing of solution. Again the draw danced among the players.

You are one of two players. There are only two choices for you to make, say red and black. The other player is hidden; only his decisions are reported to you.

If both of you pick red, you gain a point each. If both are black, a point is lost. But if you choose red and your opponent votes black, he wins *two* points, and you lose two.

He who cooperates in spirit, he who senses the Total wins.

Sabal is infinitely more complex, but contains the same elements. The problem set by the men ran dark with subtle streams of anguish, insecurity.

But now the play was returning to me. I watched the solution as it formed around the hexagon. Rejoiced in harmony of spirit. Indicated slight displeasure when divergent modes were attempted. Rebuked personal gain. And drew closer to my men.

"Free yourself from all bonds," I chanted, "and bring to rest the ten thousand things. The way is near, but we seek it afar."

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The mood caught slowly at first and uncertainty was dominant, but with the rhythm of repetition a compromise was struck. Anxiety began to submerge. Conflicting images in the Game weakened.

I caught the uprush of spirit at its peak, chanting joyfully of completion as I brought the play to rest. Imposed the dreamlike flicker of gamebal and bead, gradually toning the opticals until we were clothed in darkness. Then stillness.

The fire burning, the iron kettle singing on the hearth, a pine bough brushing the roof, water dripping.

The hexagon broke and we left, moving in concert.

The Game on our flagship was among the best, but it was not enough for the entire mission. I ordered Sabal as often as possible on all ships, and hoped it would keep us in correct phase. I didn't have time to attend all Games, because we were getting closer to drop and all details weren't worked out.

In the hour preceding the jump, I made certain that I was seen in every portion of the ship, moving confidently among the men. The number of ships lost in the jump is small, but rising dangerously and everyone knew it.

I ended up on the center bridge to watch the process, even though it was virtually automatic. The specialists and crewmen moved quickly in the dull red light that simulated nightfall—jump came at 2200—and fifteen minutes before the computers were set to drop us through, I gave the traditional order to proceed. It was purely a formalism, but in theory the synchronization could be halted even at the last instant. But if it was, the requirements of calculating time alone would delay the jump for weeks. The machines were the key.

And justly so. Converting a ship into tachyons in a nanosecond of real-space time is an inconceivably complex process. Men invented it, but they could never control it without the faultless coordination of micro-electronics.

I looked at the fixed, competent faces around me in the bridge. It was a little more than one minute to jump. The strain showed, even though some tried to hide it. The process wasn't perfect and they knew it.

Nothing was said about it at the Fleet level, but micro-electronic equipment had been deteriorating slowly for years. The techniques were gradually being lost, craftsmanship grew rare and half-measures were used. It was part of the slow nibbling decline our society had suffered for the last half century. It was almost expected.

But these men bet their lives on the jump rig, and they knew it might fail.

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The silvery chimes rang down thin, padded corridors, sounding the approach of jump. I could feel the men in the decks around me, lying in near darkness on tatami mats, waiting.

There was a slightly audible count, a tense moment, and I closed my eyes at the last instant.

A bright arc flashed beyond my eyelids, showing the blood vessels, and I heard the dark, whispering sound of the void. A pit opened beneath me, the falling sensation began.

Then the fluorescents hummed again and everything was normal, tension relieved, men smiling.

I looked out the foreward screen and saw the shimmering halo of gas that shrouded the star of Regeln. At our present velocity, we would be through it in a day and falling down the potential well directly toward the sun. There wasn't much time.

We had to come in fast, cutting the rim of plasma around Regeln's star to mask our approach. If we dropped in with that white-hot disk at our backs, we would have a good margin over any detection system that was looking for us.

Regeln is like any life-supporting world: endlessly varied, monotonously dull, spaced with contrast wherever you look, indescribable. It harbors belts of jungle, crinkling grey swaths of mountains, convoluted snake-rivers and frigid blue wastes. The hazy air carries the hum of insects, the pad of ambling vegetarians, the smooth click of teeth meeting. And winds that deafen, oceans that laugh, tranquillity beside violence. It is like any world that is worth the time of man.

But its crust contains fewer heavy elements than are necessary for the easy construction of a jump station or docking base. So it fell under the control of the colonization-only faction of Fleet. They had moved in quickly with xenobiologists to perform the routine miracles that made the atmosphere breathable.

Wildlife was some problem, but during the twenty-odd years the atmosphere was being treated, a continent was cleared of the more malignant varieties. There was a four-meter scorpion which could run like a deer, among other things. I saw it in an Earthside zoo, and shuddered.

Drop time caught us with only the rudiments of a defense network. There simply wasn't time to train the men, and we were constantly missing relevant equipment. I wished for better point-surveillance gear a hundred separate times as we slipped into the Regeln system.

But no Quarm ships were visible, no missiles rose to meet us. Tonji wanted to get out of the sky as soon as physically possible, even though it would've been expensive in reaction mass. I vetoed it and

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threw us into a monocycle "orange slice" orbit for a look before we went down, but there turned out to be nothing to see after all.

Our base was buttoned up. No vehicles moved on the roads, not even expendable drones for surveillance. I had prints of the base defenses, even the periscope holes, but when we checked there was no sign that they were open. Scattered bluish clouds slid over the farmhouses and fields of grain, but nothing moved on the surface.

There wasn't time to think, send down probes, play a game of cat and mouse. I had a drone mass info out to the system perimeter, where random radiation from the star wouldn't mask the torch of an incoming Quarm ship, but I couldn't rely on it completely.

"Skimmers ready, sir," Tonji said.

"Good. Order all three down immediately." The skimmers were fast and can usually maneuver around manual surface-air defenses.

They landed easily, formed a regulation triangle defense in the valley where the colony's HQ was buried under a low, crusty hill, and reported back. When their skins had cooled to the minimum safety point, they popped out their hovercraft and moved off, checking the covered entrances. No signals were coming out of the hill. There were no flash marks, no sign of the use of any weapons.

A pilot landed near the main entrance, shucked his radiation gear for speed and tried the manual alarms mounted for emergency purposes near the vault door. Nothing.

I got all this over TV, along with a running account of additional data from the other ships spread out in orbit around Regeln. The pilot on the ground asked for further instructions. From the sound of his voice I could tell the order he wanted was to pull out, and fast, but he didn't expect to get it.

And I couldn't give it. You don't walk away from a colony that's in trouble, even if it does look like an obvious trap.

"Tell him to use his sappers," I said. "Get the others over there, too, but keep watching the other entrances from orbit. It's going to take a while to kick in the door, but we've got to look inside."

Tonji nodded and started to code. "Tell him I'm coming down, too."

He looked at me, surprised for the first time since I'd known him.

I rang Matsuda over inboard and placed him in temporary command of the convoy in orbit. "Tonji is coming with me. If the Quarm show, give us an hour to get up here. If we don't make it, mass out. Don't hang around. These ships are worth more than we are."

I looked at Tonji and he smiled.

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The shuttle down was slow but gentle, since it was designed for pushing soft flatlanders back and forth from orbit. I didn't have time to enjoy the ride because I was listening to the efforts of the ground crew to blow the hatch off the entrance. Regeln's sky flitted past, a creamy blend of reds and blues like a lunatic tropical drink, and then we were down.

The pilot of the hovercraft that took me out to the site was jumpy, but we made it faster than I would've thought possible. I was out the hatch before they got chocks under the wheels, and the lieutenant in charge came toward me at double time.

"Had to drill and tap, sir," he said quickly, saluting. "We're ready to blow it."

I gave the nod and we ducked behind a gentle rise at the base of the hill, a hundred meters away from the portal. Everything was dead still for a moment, and I thought for the first time that the ground beneath me was alien, a new planet. In the rush I'd accepted it as though it were Earth.

The concussion was as sharp as a bone snapping and debris showered everywhere. In a moment I was moving up with the main body of men, before the dirt had cleared. The portal was only partially opened, a testament to the shelter's designer, but we could get through.

Three runners went in with lights and were back in minutes.

"Deserted for the first few corridor levels," one of them said. "We need more men inside to keep a communications link."

Tonji led the next party. Most of the crewmen were inside before word came back that they'd found somebody. I went in then with three guards and some large arc lamps. None of the lighting in the corridors of the shelter was working—the bulbs were smashed.

Men were clustered at one end of the corridor on the second level, their voices echoing nervously off the glazed concrete.

"You've got something, Mr. Tonji?" I said. He turned away from the open door, where he had been talking to a man whose uniform was covered with dirt. He looked uncertain.

"I think so, sir. According to the maps we have of the base, this door leads to a large auditorium. But a few meters inside—well, look."

I stepped through the door and halted. A number of steps beyond, the cushioned walkway ended and a block of *something*—dirt, mostly, with fragments of furniture, wall partitions, unidentifiable rubble—rose to the ceiling.

I looked at Tonji, questioning.

"A ramp downward starts about there. The whole auditorium is filled with this—we checked the lower floors, but the doors off adjacent corridors won't open."

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"How did it get here?"

"The levels around the auditorium have been stripped bare and most of the wall structure torn out, straight down to the bedrock and clay the base was built on. Somebody carted a lot of dirt away and dumped it in here." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes.

"What's that?" I pointed at a black oval depression sunk back into the grey mass of dirt, about two meters off the floor.

"A hole. Evidently a tunnel. It was covered with an office rug until Nahran noticed it." He gestured back at the man in the dirty uniform.

"So he went inside. What's there?"

Tonji pinched his lip with a well-manicured thumb and forefinger. "A man. He's pretty far back, Nahran says. That's all I can get out of Nahran, though—he's dazed. The man inside is hysterical. I don't think we can drag him out through that hole, it's too narrow."

"That's all? One man?"

"There might be a lot of people inside there. We've heard noises out of several of these holes. I think this thing that fills the auditorium is honeycombed with tunnels. We've seen the entrance of several more from the balcony."

I checked the time. "Let's go."

Tonji turned and started back through the door.

"No, Mr. Tonji. This way."

For a second he didn't believe it, and then the glassy impersonal look fell over his face. "We're both going to crawl in there, sir?"

"That's right. It's the only way I can find out enough to make a decision."

He nodded and we spent a few minutes arranging details, setting timetables. I tried to talk with Nahran while I changed into a tight pullover worksuit. He couldn't tell me very much. He seemed reticent and slightly dazed. Something had shocked him.

"Follow immediately after me, Mr. Tonji." We both carefully emptied out pockets, because the passage was obviously too narrow to admit anything jutting out. Tonji carried the light. I climbed up onto the slight ledge in front of the dark oval and looked across the slate grey face of the thing. It was huge.

Men were crowding in the doorway of the thing. I waved with false heartiness and began working my legs into the hole. I went straight down into a nightmare.

My thighs and shoulders braked me as the force of gravity slowly pulled me down the shaft. I held my arms above my head and close together, because there wasn't much room to keep them at my sides.

After a moment my feet touched, scraped, and then set-

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tled on something solid. I felt around with my boots and for a moment thought it was a dead end. But there was another hole in the side, off at an angle. I slowly twisted until I could sink into it up to my knees.

I looked up. It wasn't more than three meters over my standing height to the top of the shaft, but it seemed to have taken a long time to get this far. I could see Tonji slowly settling down behind me, towing a light above his head.

I wriggled into the narrow side channel, grunting and already beginning to hate the smell of packed dirt and garbage. In a moment I was stretched flat on my back, working my way forward by digging in my heels and pushing with my palms against the walls.

The ceiling of the tunnel brushed against my face in the utter blackness. I felt the oppressive weight of the packed dirt crushing down on me. My own breath was trapped in front of my face, and I could hear only my own gasps, amplified.

"Tonji?" I heard a muffled shout in reply. A trace of light illuminated the tunnel in front of me, and I noticed a large rock was embedded in the side. The auditorium was probably filled with a skeleton of stone that supported the packed soil.

I came to a larger space and was able to turn around and enter the next hole head first. The entrance way was wide, but it quickly narrowed, and I felt mud squeeze between my fingers. The walls pressed down. Some of the clay had turned to mud.

A chill seeped up my legs and arms as I inched forward. I twisted my shoulder blades and pulled with my fingers. The going was easier because the passage tilted slightly downward, but the ooze sucked at me.

I wondered how a man could have gotten in here, or out. With every lunge forward my chest scraped against the sides, rubbing the skin raw and squeezing my breath out. It seemed just possible that I could get through.

Tonji shouted and I answered. The reply was muffled against the wall and I wondered if he had heard. I could feel the irregular bumps in the wall with my hands, and I used them to measure how far I had come.

Progress was measured in centimeters, then even less. My forearms were beginning to stiffen with the effort.

A finger touched the wall, found nothing. I felt cautiously and discovered a sudden widening in the tunnel. At the same instant there was a scraping sound in the night ahead of me, the sound of something being dragged across a floor. It was moving away.

I got a good grip on the opening, pushed and was through it. I rolled to the side and kept close

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to the wall. Flickers of light from Tonji showed a small, rectangular room, but there was no one in it. A row of darkened holes were sunk into the opposite wall.

Tonji wriggled through the passage, breathing heavily in the cold air. The light he carried was almost blinding, even though it was on low beam.

I found I could get to my knees without bumping my head. I stretched out my cramped legs and rubbed them to start circulation.

"Nothing here," he said in a whisper.

"Maybe. Throw the beam on those holes."

He played it across the opposite wall.

"Aeeeeeee!"

The shrill scream filled the surrounding area, and I caught sight of a head of filthy hair that wrenched further back into the uppermost hole.

I started toward him on hands and knees and stopped almost immediately. The floor below the holes was strewn with excrement and trash. Tonji swallowed and looked sick.

After a moment I moved forward and my foot rattled an empty food tin. I could barely see the man far back in his hole.

"Come out. What's wrong?" The man pressed himself further back as I picked my way toward him. He whispered, cried, hid his face from the light.

"He won't answer," Tonji said.

"I suppose not." I stopped and looked at some of the other holes. The rock on this side of the room was intolerable. I hadn't noticed it in the tunnel because there was a cool draft blowing out of one of the holes in the wall. It kept the air in the room circulating away from the tunnel we'd used.

"Flash the light up there," I said. A human hand hung out of one of the holes. Cloth and sticks had been stuffed into the opening to try to keep in the smell.

There were other holes like it. Some others were packed with food, most of it partially eaten.

"Can we go back?" Tonji asked.

I ignored him and moved closer to one of the openings with a larger mouth. It sucked the dank air around me down into a black hole. In the empty silence I could hear the faint echoes of wailing and sobbing from further inside. They mingled together in a dull hum of despair.

"Bring the light," I said.

"I think it's getting colder in here, sir." He hesitated a moment and then duck-walked closer.

The man was still moaning to himself in his hole. I clenched my jaw muscles in involuntary revulsion and with an effort of will reached out and touched him. He cringed away, burrowing down, sobbing with fear.

There was part of a sleeve left on his arm—the light blue cloth of

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the Fleet. I looked back at the tunnel we'd just used and estimated the difficulty of pulling a struggling man through it.

"We're not going to get any more out of this," I said.

The cold was clinging to my limbs again, but Tonji was sweating. He looked about the hole nervously, as if expecting attack. The silence was oppressive, but I seemed to hear more clearly now the convulsive sobbing from further inside the mound.

I motioned quickly to Tonji and we pressed ourselves into the tunnel. I made as rapid progress as I could, with him scrambling close at my heels.

The dead weight squeezed us with rigid jaws. I tried to notice markings on the sides that would measure how far we had come, but I began to get confused.

It took me a moment to realize the air was definitely getting worse. It clung to my throat and I couldn't get enough. My chest was caught in the tunnel's vice and my lungs would never fill.

Between wriggling to squirm up the slight grade, I stopped to listen for sounds from the men at the entrance. Nothing. The long tunnel pressed at me, and I gave myself over to an endless series of pushing and turning, rhythmically moving forward against the steady hand of gravity and the scraping of the walls.

Tonji's light sent dim traces of light along the walls. I noticed how smooth they were. How many people had worn them down? How many were in here? And, God, *why?*

The tunnel began to narrow, I got through one opening by expelling all my breath and pushing hard with my heels. Coming in hadn't seemed this hard.

There was an open space that temporarily eased the pressure, and then ahead I saw walls narrowing again. I pushed and turned, scrabbling on the slick dirt with all my strength. A flicker of light reflected over my shoulder, and I could see the passage closing even further.

Impossible. A massive hand was squeezing the life out of me and my mind clutched frantically at an escape. The air was positively foul. I felt ahead and grunted with the effort. The walls closed even more. I knew I couldn't get through.

My hand touched something, but I was too numbed with the cold to tell what it was.

"Light," I managed to whisper. I heard Tonji turning, breathing rapidly, and in a moment the beam got brighter.

It was a man's foot.

I recoiled; for a moment I couldn't think and my mind was a flood of horror.

"Back," I gasped. "We can't go this way."

"This . . . way . . . we came in."

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"No." Suddenly the air was too thick to take it any longer. I started to slide backwards.

"Go on!" He hit my boots.

"Back up, Mr. Tonji."

I waited and the dirt pressed at me, closing in everywhere. It was only mud. What if it collapsed?

Tonji was silent and after a moment I felt him move back. I had been holding my breath ever since my hand felt something, and I let it out as I scrambled back down the tunnel. The man hadn't been there long, but it was enough. The air was heavy with it.

I noticed I was sweating now, despite the chill. Had we taken the right hole when we left the man back there? We could be working our way further into the mound, not out of it.

How long could I take the air? I could tell Tonji was on the edge already. Did we miss a turn coming out and go down the wrong way? It was hard to imagine, in the closeness of the tunnel.

My ribs were rubbed raw and they stung whenever I moved. The weight closed on me from every direction. I pulled backward slowly, trying to collect my thoughts. I moved automatically.

After a few moments my left hand reached out and touched nothing. I stopped, but Tonji went on, as if in a stupor. I listened to his moving away, blinking uncomprehendingly at the hole to my left and tried to think.

"Wait? This is it!"

We had both missed the turn, somehow. The air had dulled our minds until we noticed nothing without conscious effort.

I worked myself into the opening. Tonji was returning and the direct glare of the beam was almost painful. He moaned something but I couldn't understand.

The passage gradually widened and I caught glimmerings of light ahead. In a moment I was standing in the vertical shaft and a man was dropping a line down to me. My hands slipped on it several times as they pulled me up.

For a few minutes I sat by the entrance, numb with fatigue. The men crowded around us and I looked at them as if they were strangers. After a while I picked out a lieutenant.

"Get . . . Jobstranikan down here." Jobstranikan had psychotherapy training, and this was clearly his job.

Orders were given and men scattered. After a moment I got up and changed back into full uniform. A runner was waiting outside the door, his nose wrinkling at the stench which I had ceased to notice.

"Sir, reports from lower levels say there are more like this. There appear to be people in them, too. The coordination center was untouched, and it's five levels down. I think they've got some of the tapes ready to run."

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I turned to Tonji. "Try to get that man out of there. Do it any way you can, but don't waste time. I'll be in the center."

The walk through the next two levels was like a trip through hell. The stink of human waste was overpowering, even though the ventilation system was working at full capacity. Arc lights we had brought down threw distorted crescents of faint blue and white along walls smeared with blood, food, excrement.

Echoes of a high, gibbering wail haunted the lower floors, coming from their hiding places. They had burrowed far back into the walls in spots, but most of the tunnel mouths were in monstrous, huge mounds like the one above. They weren't hiding from us alone; their warrens were surrounded by piles of refuse. They had been in there for weeks.

Jobstranikan caught up with us just before we worked our way to the center.

"It is difficult, sir," he said. "It is like the legends—the country of madness, possessed by devils and monsters."

"What's happened to them?"

"Everything. At first I thought they had a complete fear of anything that they could sense—light, movement, noise. But that is misleading. They screech at each other incoherently. They won't let us touch them and they cry, scream, and fight if we try."

"Has Tonji been able to get any of them out?"

"Only by knocking them unconscious. One of his men was bitten badly when they tried to drag that man out. Getting anyone out of this mess is going to be a major job."

There was a guard outside the center. Broken bits of furniture and electronic gear were strewn down the corridor, but inside the center itself everything was in order.

"The hatch was sealed electronically and coded, sir," the officer inside explained. "We brought down the tracers and opened it. Somebody must have seen what was happening and made certain no one could get in here before we arrived."

I walked over to the main display board. Technicians were taping the readouts we would need from the center's computer bank, working with feverish haste. I motioned Jobstranikan back to duty and turned to the officer.

"Have you got any preliminary results? Is there an oral log that covers the Quarm attack?"

"No oral yet. We do have a radar scan." He fitted a roll into the projector attachment of the display board. "I've cut it to begin with the first incursion into this system."

He dimmed the lights in this section of the center, and the green background grid of a radar

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scan leaped into focus. The relative locations of the other planets in the Regeln system were shown —here lumps of cold rock, for the most part—and a small Quarm dot was visible on the perimeter of the screen, glowing a soft red.

"They took their time getting here, apparently." The projection rate increased. More dots joined the first to form a wedge-shaped pattern. A blue line detached itself from the center of the screen and moved outward, shrinking to a point—a defensive move from Regeln.

"All available missiles seem to have been fired. The Quarm took a few hits, but they could outmaneuver most of them. I'm afraid we launched too soon, and by the time our seekers were within range, their fuel reserves weren't up to a long string of dodges."

The red dots moved quickly, erratically, in a pantomime dance with the blue defenders. The distance between them was never short enough to permit a probable kill with a nuclear charge, and eventually the blue dots fell behind and were lost. They winked out when their reaction mass was exhausted.

"Except for the atmospheric ships, that finished their defenses. This colony wasn't built to carry on a war. But something strange happened."

The Quarm ships drifted toward center screen at an almost leisurely pace. A small missile flared out, went into orbit around Regeln and disappeared.

"That was the satellite link. They got that and then . . ."

"And then left," I finished. The red dots were backing off. They gradually picked up velocity, regrouped and in a few minutes slipped off the grid. The screen went black.

"That is all we have. This clipping covered about eight days, but we can't be sure anybody was watching the last part of it because the recording mechanism was automatic. It stopped when it ran out of film. This room may have been sealed anytime after they launched their missiles."

"None of this explains what happened here. The Quarm didn't touch Regeln, but this shelter is full of lunatics. Something made the Quarm stop their attack and leave." I looked around at the banks and consoles. I could feel a tightness forming somewhere. That old feeling of rightness, certainty of position, was slipping away.

"Get every record you can, in duplicate tapes if possible," I ordered, trying to shrug off the mood. The officer saluted and I went back into the corridors with a guard detail. I made a note to get respiration packs down here as soon as possible and meanwhile held my breath as long as I could between gasps.

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The route we took back was different, but no less horrible. Here there were bodies lying among the wreckage, most of them in advanced stages of decay. Two of my guards gagged in the close, putrid atmosphere of the corridors. We kept moving as quickly as we could, avoiding the half-open doors from which came the faint shrill gibbering of madmen. Most of the bodies we saw had been stabbed or clubbed and left to die. A large proportion were women. In any contest of strength they wouldn't last long, and they hadn't received any special consideration.

When we reached the perimeter Tonji had established, the air improved. Men were moving along the corridors in teams, spraying the walls with a soapy solution.

"The water and drainage systems are still working, so I decided to use them," Tonji said. He seemed to have recovered from the tunnel. "Wherever we can we're sealing off the places where they lived, and merely hope we can keep the halls clean."

Jobstranikan came around a nearby corner portal we'd blasted through only a short while before. "Any new ideas?"

"Not as yet, I fear." He shook his head and the long Mongolian locks tangled together on the back of his neck. He wore it in traditional semi-tribal fashion, like most of my officers. It was dull black, in the manner of the soldiers of the Khan and the Patriarch, and braided at the tail with bright leather thongs. The style was as old as the great central plains of Asia.

"I can make no sense of it. They fought among themselves at first, I think, for the bodies we've found are at least weeks old. Since then they've stayed back in those holes they made for themselves, eating the food supplies they'd gotten earlier. But they don't want to leave. Every one I've seen wants to burrow into the smallest volume possible and stay there. We've found them in cupboards, jammed into ventilation shafts, even. . . ."

"Signal for me?" I asked the crewman in charge. We'd reached a temporary communication link. He handed me a receiver and I pulled the hushpiece over my head. If this was what I thought it was, I didn't want anyone to know before I told them.

It was Matsuda. "Our drone is registering approaching extra-solar ships. Preliminary trajectory puts them into the Regeln orbit."

I let out a long breath. In a way I'd almost been expecting it. "What's their Doppler shift?"

There was a pause, then: "It is not enough for them to be braking from a star jump. The pectroscope says they're on full torch, however. They couldn't have been accelerating very long."

"In other words, this is the same group that hit—or didn't

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hit—Regeln the first time. How long can we have on the surface?"

"Sir, readout says you can stay down there about five hours and not incur more than five percent risk to the convoy. Can you get them out if I give you that much?"

"We'll see," I said, and went back to Tonji.

It was impossible. With all shuttles and skimmers we saved a little over three thousand, only a fraction of the colony's population. Most of the interior of the shelter was never reached.

As it was, we boosted late and a Quarm interceptor almost caught us. A yellow fusion burst licked at us as we pulled away, so we never saw what the rest of the Quarm did to Regeln, and I don't suppose anyone else will either because it's in the middle of their territory now.

After a few unsuccessful attempts, I decided to stop trying to communicate with the lunatics we had scattered among the ships. Jobstranikan wanted to try treatment on some of them, but the medics were having a hell of a time just patching up their injuries and infections, and treating malnutrition.

The Quarm didn't try to follow us out of the system. I thought this strange, and so did Tonji.

"It does not make sense," he said. "We don't know a lot about their drive systems, but they might have a good chance of catching us. It would certainly be worth a try. If you've set a trap, why spring it half-heartedly?"

"Maybe it's not that kind of trap," I said.

Tonji frowned. "Do you mean they might be waiting for us further along trajectory? We're already out of detection range of any Quarm ships, and the jump is coming up. They'll never trace us through that."

"No, nothing. It was just a thought." Not a well-defined one, at that. Still, something was bothering me. It wasn't lessened any when Tonji reported the results from Intelligence.

"The computer analysis of the colony's radar scan is finished," he began. "Regardless of what happened to the colony itself, the machines have a low opinion of Quarm tactics. Regard."

He flicked on a screen above my desk, and the pattern of red and blue points on a green grid began to repeat itself. "Notice this shortly after initial contact."

The blue dots danced and played as they moved in, performing an intricate pattern of opposing and coalescing steps. The red Quarm ships back-pedaled and moved uncertainly.

"The Quarm had ballistic superiority and more maneuverability. But notice how they avoided the Regeln missiles."

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The red points dodged back, moving in crescents that narrowly avoided the feints and slashes of blue. The crescent formed, fell back. Again. And again. The Quarm were using the same tactic, relying on their superior power to carry them beyond Regeln attack at the cusp-point. I'm not a tactican, but I could see it was wasteful of energy and time.

"They continued this until the interceptors ran out of reaction mass. If they'd been pitted against equals, the engagement wouldn't have lasted two minutes."

I clicked off the screen. "What does it mean?"

Tonji poked the air with a finger. "It means we have got them. Over the last year they've had the luck to hit border planets that weren't first-line military emplacements. We haven't had a look at their techniques because they didn't let anyone get away. But these tactics are schoolbook examples! If this is the best they can do, we'll wipe them out when our fleets move in."

He was over-enthusiastic, but he was right. Our defenses were solidly based on the fleet-principle, with interlocking layers of tactical directorates, hundred-ship armadas and echelons of command. It was very much like the surface aquatic navies of Earth history. On these terms, the Quarm were disastrously inferior.

The news should have quieted the unease I felt, but instead it grew. I began to notice outbreaks of rudeness among the crew, signs of worry on the faces of the officers, disruption of spirit. The tedium of caring for the colonists could certainly account for some of it—they refused to be calmed and had to be restrained from destroying their room furniture. They were using it to construct the same sort of ratholes we'd found them in.

But that wasn't all. Crewmen began missing meals, staying in their cabins and not talking to anyone else. The ship took on a quiet, tense mood. I ordered resumption of the Games at once.

We almost got through it.

There was divisive talking and nervousness instead of the steady calm of self-contemplation, before the Sabal began, but the opening rituals damped and smoothed it. I thought I detected a relaxation running like a wave through the hexagon. Muscles unstiffened, consciousness cleared and we drew together.

It is usual in the Game to choose a theme which begins with a statement of the virtue of community, test it, and then return to initial configuration, the position of rest. I anticipated trouble, but not enough to make a change of game plot necessary. The plot ran smoothly at first, until we came to first resolution point.

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One of the lower deckmen, who had been in the shelter caverns from the first entry, was called by the chance of the game to make the decision. He hesitated, looked guiltily at his card and beads, and made a choice that profited himself at the expense of the other players.

Everything came to a stop.

I could feel the group teetering on edge. The men were straining for sense of harmony and trying to decide how to play when their turn came. A bad play isn't unknown to Sabal, but now it could be dangerous.

I repeated the confirmation rituals hoping it would calm them—and myself—but the next play was a choice of withdrawal. No gain for the individual, but the group did not profit, and the net effect was bad. Fear began to slip from member to member down the hexagon.

The plays came rapidly now. Some men tried to reinforce the message and cast configurations that benefited the group. They were swamped, one by one, and the Game began to fall apart.

I used the chant. Tranquillity, detachment, the words rose and fell. Interpenetrating. Interconverting. The mosquito bit the bar of iron.

My own cast held them for a while out of respect for my position, but in a quick string of plays its advantage was nibbled away.

Then the flood came. A dozen casts went by, all having loss of phase. The theme was not gain, but a pulling away from the group, and that was what made the failure so serious. Withdrawal strikes at the social structure itself.

I seized control of the Game, breaking off a subplot that was dragging us deeper. I drew a moral, one I'd learned years before and hoped to never use. It slurred over the resolution of the Game and emphasized the quality of the testing, without questioning whether the test had been met. It was an obvious loss, but it was all I could do.

The hexagon broke and the men burst into conversation, nearly panic-stricken. They moved out of the room, jostling and shoving, and broke up as they reached the halls. A few glanced quickly at me and then looked away. In a moment the only sound was the hissing of the air system and the distant quick tapping of boots on deck.

Tonji remained. He looked puzzled.

"What do you think it means?" I said.

"Probably just that the mission was too much for us. We'll be all right after landfall."

"I don't think so. Our Games before worked well, but this one shattered before it was half finished. That's too much of a change."

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"What, then?"

"It's something to do with this mission. Something . . . What percentage of the crew have regular contact with the Regeln survivors?"

"With the way the nursemaid shifts are set up now, about sixty percent. Every man who's replaceable for more than an hour on his job has to help feed and clean them, or assist the psych teams who are working on the problem."

"So even though we're off Regeln, most of the men continue to see them."

"Yes, but it's unavoidable. Our orders were to bring back as many as we could, and we are."

"Of course." I waved my hand irritably. "But the Game failed tonight because of those survivors, I'm sure of that. I can't prove it, but it's the only reasonable answer. The strain of putting this set of crews into war-status duty isn't small, but we've allowed for it in our planning. It doesn't explain this."

Tonji gave me a stiff look. "Then what does?"

"I don't know." I was irritated at the question, because I *did* know—in a vague, foreboding sense—and his question uncovered my own fear.

"The Sabal Game has something to do with it. That and the way our ships—hell, our whole society—has to be run. We emphasize cooperation and phase. We teach that a man's happiness depends on the well-being of the group, and the two are inseparable. Even in our contacts with alien races, until the Quarm, we spread that philosophy. We try to draw closer to beings who are fundamentally different from us."

"That is the way any advanced society must be structured. Anything else is suicide on the racial scale."

"Sure, sure. But the Quarm apparently don't fit that mold. They've got something different. They work almost completely alone and live in cities only, I suppose, because of economic reasons. Most of what we know about them is guesswork because they don't like contact with others, even members of their own race. We've had to dig out our own data bit by bit."

Tonji spread his hands. "That is the reason for this mission. The Regeln survivors may be able to tell us something about the Quarm. We need an idea of how they think."

"From what we've seen of them, I don't think they'll be any help. The survivors have gone too far over the edge, and already they're threatening the convoy."

"Threatening? With what?"

"Disruption, mutiny—something. All I can say is that when this Sabal started, the crew was in bad condition, but they could be reached. They still communicated.

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"During the Game, though, the tension *increased*. We didn't witness here the exposure of what the men were thinking. Their fears were augmented, piled on top of each other. I could feel it running through the subplots they made a part of the Game. There's something we do—and the Game is just a way of concentrating it—that increases the imbalance we picked up from the Regeln survivors."

"But in the Game we duplicate our society, our way of living, if *that* amplifies the imbalance . . ."

"Exactly," I said despairingly. "Exactly."

I slept on it that night, hoping something would unravel the knot of worry while I slept. Over a lonely breakfast in my cabin I reviewed the conversation and tried to see where my logic was leading.

A sense of dread caught my stomach and twisted it, turning to lead the meal of rice and seaculture broth.

How can a man step outside himself and guess the reactions of aliens utterly unlike him? I was trying to find the key to the riddle of Regeln with all the elements in full view.

Something formed. I let my senses out through the ship, feeling the usual rhythms of life, reaching for the . . . other. An alien element was there. I knew, with a new certainty, what it was.

I picked up my tea cup and focused on my kensdai altar. The deep mahogany gave me confidence. Power and resolution flowed outward from my body center. I balanced the cup lightly in my hand.

And slammed it down. Jump was coming. I had to stop it.

I had forgotten that Tonji was to be bridge officer during the jump. He was making routine checks in the somber green light of morning watch. Men moved expertly around him, with a quiet murmur.

"Great greetings of morn, sir," he said. "We have come to the point for your permission to jump."

Then it was already late, far later than I'd thought. I looked at him steadily.

"Permission denied, Mr. Tonji. Ready a fourspace transmission."

I could feel a hush fall on the bridge.

"May I ask what the transmission will say, sir?"

"It's a request to divert this convoy. I want the expedition put into decontamination status until this is understood."

Tonji didn't move. "There are only a few moments until jump, sir."

"It's an order, Mr. Tonji."

"Perhaps if you would explain the reasoning, sir?"

I glanced at the morning board. It showed a huge sick report, most of them accompanied by requests

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to remain in quarters. All divisions were undermanned.

It fitted. In a few days we wouldn't be able to operate at all.

"Look," I said impatiently, "the Quarm did something to our people. Probably a psychtape—except orders of magnitude more effective—smuggled into their communications system by an agent. I don't know exactly how, but those colonists have been given the worst trauma anybody's ever seen."

"An agent? One of our own people?"

"It's been done before, by idealists and thugs alike. But the important point is that when we picked up Quarm ships on our screens they weren't trying any maneuvers to throw off detectors or give false images. It was a classic ballistic problem they presented to us, and all we had to do was leave Regeln early enough to out-mass them. They *wanted* us to escape."

"But look at their maneuvers on that first run against Regeln, the one that ran our people underground. That's all the evidence we need. They're children when it comes to military tactics. The second approach was simple, yes, but it was probably all they could do."

"I don't think so, not if the Quarm are half as intelligent as the rest of our data tells us. So their first attack *did* drive the colonists under—fine. It got all the Regeln population in one place, inside the shelter where whatever techniques the Quarm knew could go to work. What looked like an error was a feint.

"Think. A knowledge of sophisticated tactics is a rather specialized cultural adaptation. For all we know, it may not be very useful in the kind of interstellar war we've just gotten into. The fact that the Quarm don't have it doesn't mean they're inferior. Quite the opposite, probably. Regeln was a trap."

"If it was, we escaped," Tonji said sharply.

"No, Mr. Tonji, we didn't. We're just serving as a convenient transport for what the Quarm want to get into the home worlds—the Regeln survivors."

"But *why?*"

"You know the analogy we use in the Game. Mankind is now, at last, an organism. Interdependent. We're forced to rely on each other because of the complexities of civilization." My own voice sounded strange to me. It was tired and a note of despair had crept in.

"Of course," Tonji said impatiently. "Go on."

"Has it ever occurred to you that once you admit society is like an organism, you admit the possibility of contagious diseases?"

"Quite frankly, I don't understand what you're talking about."

"The survivors. They're enough of a test sample to set it off, apparently. An average crew mem-

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ber spends several hours a day with them, and the continual exposure is enough."

"Why aren't you affected, then? And the men who aren't on the sick list—why don't they have it?"

"Minor variations in personality. And there's something else. I checked. Some of them are from the off-islands, like me. We're different. We didn't grow up with the Game. We learned it later on the mainlands. Maybe that weakens its effect."

He shook his head. "Yes, this thing the colonists have is different, but . . ."

"It claws at the mind. It's irrational. We're the product of our ancestors, Mr. Tonji, and these ancestors knew terrors we cannot comprehend. Remember, this is a new psychosis we've found on Regeln, a combination. Fear of light, heat, heights, open spaces. That last one, agoraphobia, seems strongest. The Quarm have worked up a first-class horror for us, and this convoy is the carrier."

"A carrier for a mental disease?" Tonji said contemptuously.

"Yes. But a disorder we've never seen before. An amalgam of the fundamental terrors of man. A collective society has the strength of a rope, because each strand pulls the same way. But it has weaknesses, too, *for the same reason.*"

The men were watching us, keeping very still. I could hear the thin beeping of monitoring units. Tonji's skin had a slight greenish cast; his eyes looked back at me impersonally.

"We're carrying it with us, Mr. Tonji. The survivors are striking the same resonant mode with us that the Quarm found in them. The Quarm hit at us through our weaknesses. They're hermits, and they see us more clearly than we see ourselves. Our interdependence, the Game and all of it, communicates the disease."

I noticed that my hand was tightening convulsively on the console at my side. Tonji stood motionless.

"Stop the jump, Mr. Tonji, and send the transmission."

He motioned to an assistant, and the jump was canceled. He stood motionless for a moment, looking at me. Then he took a quick backward step, came to attention and saluted. When he spoke, the words were measured carefully and he wore that same blank stare.

"Sir, it is my duty to inform you that I must file a Duty Officer's Report when your dispatch is transmitted. I invoke Article Twenty-seven."

I froze.

Article Twenty-seven provides that the duty officer may send a counterargument to the Commander's dispatch when it is transmitted. When he feels the Commander is no longer competent to conduct his duties.

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"You're wrong, Mr. Tonji," I said slowly. "Taking these survivors—and by now, most of the crew—into a major port will cause more damage than you or I can imagine."

"I have been observing you, sir. I don't think you're capable of making a rational decision about this thing."

"Man, think! What other explanation can there be for what's happening to this ship? You've seen those tapes. Do you think the scraps of information on them are worth the risk of delivery? Do you think *anyone* can get even a coherent sentence out of those lunatics we're carrying?"

He shook his head mutely.

I looked across the dark void between us. He was a man of the East, and I represented the dead and dying. In the histories they wrote, the ideals my ancestors held were called a temporary abnormality, a passing alternative to the communal, the group-centered culture.

Perhaps they were right. But we had met something new out here, and I knew they wouldn't understand it. Perhaps the Americans would have, or the Europeans. But they were gone.

I should have anticipated that the lost phase we all felt would take different forms. Tonji chose ambition above duty, above the ship.

If Fleet upheld him there would be promotions, even though he had used Article Twenty-seven. And I stood here, bound by rules and precedents. If I made a move to silence Tonji, it would count against my case with Fleet. We were on a rigid schedule now that the Article was used, and nothing I could do would stop it.

"Mr. Tonji! You realize, don't you, that one of us will be finished when this is over?"

He turned and looked at me, and for a moment a flash of anticipation crossed his face. He must have hated me for a long time.

"Yes, I have thought of that. And I think I know which one of us it will be."

He didn't finish the sentence aloud. He mouthed it, so only I could see his lips move.

"... ofkaipan."

He was right. Fleet wanted to talk to anyone who'd had battle contact with the Quarm, and they weren't ready to wait for a convoy commander with suspicions and a theory.

We lingered in real space for a week, waiting for the decision, and then jumped. The trial was short.

"Haven't you gone out for your walk yet?" Angela said.

The sound startled me, even though I'd been blocking out the noise of the kids and their viewscreen. She stood in the door of our bedroom a few feet away, the

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lines of tension still set in the pale yellow cast of her face. I was beginning to think they would never smooth out again. She had been pretty, once.

"I guess I forgot it. Want to go with me?"

She nodded and I got up from the cramped breakfast nook, stacking the papers I still hadn't reviewed.

I cut the corridor lights before we stepped outside our apartment door, and we linked hands automatically. I put my right palm on the wall and we inched forward. The terror caught at me, but I fought it down.

"Honestly, I don't see why you're so set against tapping for the children." Her voice was hollow in the darkness. It reflected off the glazed concrete that was close and sheltering. "With all of us at war, any aid to increase education is a godsend. Without it they just fall further and further behind their playmates."

"What playmates? Children don't play any more. Games take space." We rounded a corner and stumbled on someone who was doubled up on the floor clutching at himself in spasms. From the sound of his breathing, I guessed he'd had an attack and couldn't go any further. We edged by him.

"Well, not the same way we did. But they have their games, new ones. You've got to accept the world as it is."

"Accept this crowding? Accept the fear that crushes you whenever you step outside? Accept the fact that a third of the population can't work and we who can—even with our guts twisted up inside—must support them?"

Her hand tightened convulsively on mine. "You know that can't be helped! We're in a . . . stage of evolution of society. Withdrawal is necessary to achieve a greater phase, later."

"And meanwhile the Quarm take one system after another. They've cut us off from most of our raw materials already, and we can't muster the men to stop them. Maybe if we're lucky they'll cut us off from our own lies before all this is over."

"Now *that* is completely unreasonable," she said icily. "It ties in with all your other ideas, like not letting Romana and Chark have tapping."

"Not letting the government tinker around in their minds, you mean, with one of their schemes for increasing the war effort. Let Chark have a brain tap so all he cares about is torch chamber design, say, and will never be happy when he's not doing it. That's right, I won't. Our kids will need every bit of mental balance they have to stay alive as a defeated race, and I don't intend to rob them of it."

We passed by some of the lower-level apartments hastily

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thrown up by the government for the more severe cases. Whimpering came from the little holes where things that had been human beings were curled up into tight balls, desperately trying to shut out the light, the sounds, all of the awful enormity of sheer open space.

Angela descended into her glacial silence, maintaining only a fingertip touch with me to retain her orientation. The walks don't seem to do either of us any good any longer, so I suppose there is a limit to their therapeutic value. I've gone about as far as I can go, as one of the original cases, and our small apartment is the largest volume my senses can stand.

Even then, the world isn't real to me. It's filled with a thousand devious terrors—the accidentally thrown light switch, an unsuspected window in an unfamiliar wall.

Out on the edge of our pitifully shrinking empire, the Fleet plays at war with the only toys it knows —guns, ships, beams—while their enemy (and what is he like, to be so wise?) fights with the only ultimate weapons between races: their weaknesses.

The men who climbed to the stars now cower in caves, driven by the horrors they inherited from the first amphibians. I do not feel at home on the earth any longer. My life lies in dark halls, jammed with people I can understand but whose fears I hate, because they are mine as well.

I will welcome the Quarm, when they come. I have been alone a long time.

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SOME VERY ODD HAPPENINGS AT KIBBLESHAM MANOR HOUSE

by Michael Harrison

I WAS STANDING AT THE BAR OF the new Marine Hotel, looking through the plate-glass picture windows at the promenade and the sea, when I saw a little old man, shriveled of face and tottery of legs, come into view. His eyes were sunk in the enormous hollows of his skeletal face, and this death's-head was framed in wispy grey hair—for he wore a long beard. Yet, for all the shocking difference in his appearance, I could not hesitate a moment in recognizing Andy, the very Compleat Sportsman of pre-war years, and my intimate friend for a decade or so before the coming of Hitler had disrupted so many of our lives. I had gone into the Army; Andy into the Navy, that "Senior Service" in which his dashing style as one of Britain's most spectacular yachtsmen soon earned him speedy and impressive promotion. And now, as I stared at him through the plate-glass window of the Marine Hotel's bar, I

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saw a shriveled-up old man who, once his startled gaze had met mine through the glass, was evidently intent on avoiding me.

I felt, I confess, that I was taking rather an unfair advantage of my old friend when I realized that only his inability to quicken his step prevented his making a determined effort to disappear before I had time to leave the bar and catch him up in the street.

But I did catch him up in the street, and when I said, "Andy! how wonderful seeing you again!" —like that—and put out my hand, he returned the clasp, for all that his grin was a bit rueful; as much, I couldn't help thinking, because he hadn't been able to escape me, as because he knew how his appearance had shocked me.

As Englishmen of our way of upbringing do, we began tentatively to probe the situation from behind our traditional defenses of banal remarks: "What a marvelous day it is, isn't it?" "You living down here now, Andy?" "Let's have a drink . . . unless you prefer some other place?" "No . . . I quite like the Marine. I go there, every now and then." And so on.

But, at any rate, I got him to turn back, and to join me at a table in a corner of the big bar, out of the direct heat of the sun. When the waiter had brought our drinks, Andy anticipated all my questions by saying,

"You know that my parents died, did you? Yes, you'd have seen that. And Verena's dead, too. . . ."

"No," I said, pretending to see something on the table, so that I should not have to meet his eyes. "No, I didn't know that. She . . . she never got any better?"

"No," said Andy. "There's that dreadful old phrase about 'a merciful relief.' Well, in this case—in Verena's case—it was true enough. You could well call it a merciful relief. You could, indeed." And, quite shockingly, he began to laugh. I looked up, and he saw what I was thinking. "No . . . you don't understand. When I said it was a merciful relief, I wasn't referring to Verena, poor darling. I was referring to us—to what was left of the Johnstones. Poor old Father. Mother. Me. And now there's nothing left of the Johnstones but me. And, as you see, there's precious little left of me."

"When did they die?" I asked, to show that I could take this sort of matey outspokenness, that I hadn't developed weak nerves in the years since the war. "Your people, I mean. . . ."

"Father died just after the war, as you know. They *said* it was cancer. Mother died about a year later. They didn't have to think anything up. She just died. But, as you knew that already, you meant, when you said, 'When did your people die?'—'When did

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Verena die?' She died when they pulled Kibblesham down. I'd got her into a very special home. . . . I may tell you about it, later. I may not. I don't know." He passed a shaking hand across his skeletal face, and shivered, as though with ague. "And then I sold Kibblesham."

"I'm sorry about Verena," I said. "I would like to have seen her again."

Andy stared at me, and then—again, and even more frighteningly this time—he began to laugh.

"My God, Tim, you don't know your luck! Thank everything you pray to that you can't even *imagine* what it was you missed!"

Old friends—especially old friends of the same sex—should be able to ask questions, to ask the other to explain exactly what is meant by a half-understood remark. But I couldn't. I hadn't the courage. I didn't know what it was that I feared to know. But I was certain that, in this, as in so many other things of past days, Andy was right. Better that I should not even begin to guess what it was which had taken Verena upstairs to her bedroom—suddenly and (for all the outer world knew) inexplicably—never to leave it, save to go to what Andy had called 'a very special home.'

I remembered then the curious atmosphere surrounding the fact of Verena's illness. Juliet had gone down to Kibblesham—it was still the countryside thirty miles from London, then—to meet me; we were to join Andy and Verena, and to go to one of those Hunt Club hops without which, so they used to say, Christmas, my dear fellow, wouldn't be complete.

But when I got down to Kibblesham by the 6 P.M. train from Paddington, I found that we were to go to the dance one short. Verena was in her room, had been confined to her room for several days past, and wouldn't, on any account, let either of us up to wish her a Happy Christmas and say how sorry we were that she would have to miss the dance. Verena, a tall, horsy blonde, would almost certainly have been the one to borrow the hunter from the stable, and ride him through the dance.

"Sends you both her salaams," said Andy, briefly, "but she'd just as soon you saw her when she's a bit better." 'Just as soon,' in our idiom, meant, 'positively forbids you to.' We didn't see Verena that night. We never saw Verena again.

I said, to bring the conversation back to normality,

"Who bought Kibblesham in the end?"

"A local order of nuns. They wanted the site for a new school."

"Oh, so some bright boy didn't get the chance of developing—as *you* should have done!"

"Well, the nuns did. They put up flats and shops, and have let

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them all. They built their school where the Five-acre Meadow used to be. They've shown a good deal of business sense. Mother, as you may remember, always used to support their convent. So, when they approached me, I let them have it."

"You must have lost a good bit on the deal."

"If you mean by that, that I could have got more in another market, I suppose so. But . . . but there were reasons why I wanted to get rid of Kibblesham . . . no, not because the family had died; there were other things, things you don't know about . . . and I let them have it. Funnily, the better offer came from the Rector. His Bishop, apparently, wanted to build a school, too—London won't be long before it gobbles up Kibblesham, and all these far-seeing characters buy for the eventual property rise."

"Why didn't you let the Rector have it?"

"I was going to. I was baptized and confirmed in his church, and much as I admire the nuns, I'm not an R.C. In fact," said Andy, absently, frowning down at the rings that he was making on the tabletop with the bottom of his glass, "I had nearly said yes, when suddenly the significance of his church's name struck me."

"St. Theobalds . . .? Why, what's the significance of *that*?"

"It's not Theo-balds," said Andy, impatiently. "The local pronunciation is 'Tibbles'—St. *Tibbles.*"

"Well . . .?"

"Well," he said, sullenly and shiftily, "'Tibbles' is the same as 'Kibbles'—and 'Kibblesham' means 'the Village of Kibble.' Or 'of Tibble.' It's the same thing. You don't know what 'Kibble' means, you say?" he asked, anxiously.

"Nor of 'Tibble,' if it comes to that," I said, facetiously.

"It's nothing to laugh at," said Andy. "Waiter! bring us another drink."

"Do you remember what Kibblesham looked like before all that rebuilding changed the look of everything?"

"Andy, I've never been back. So far as I am concerned, it's the same."

"Oh well. Then you remember how everything was. The Manor House, the Parish Church, the row of shops, the tied cottages . . . that sort of thing. You remember, across the road from the Manor House, there was a big field—it was under barley, the last time I saw it—with a windbreak of enormous elms in the top left-hand corner? Yes, I know you do. And do you remember my telling you that the ploughman—it was farmer Richard's land—used to plough up colored *tesserae* . . . bits of a Roman tessellated pavement, and that I suggested that

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you and I should excavate for the Roman villa which *must* lie under Richard's land, under the road which cuts between . . . *cut* between . . . his land and ours, and, supposedly, under the Manor House itself?"

"I remember. I've seen the Ordnance Survey Map of Roman Britain, since then. It's all Roman-settled country round Kibblesham. It's quite likely that there *was* a Roman villa under the Manor House. It's even possible that the Manor House is the direct descendant of the villa itself."

"Kibblesham is Roman," said Andy. "But it wasn't a villa . . . it was a temple. That's why I'm glad that it was the nuns who bought it . . . to pull it down. If anyone can make the break between Kibblesham's past and Kibblesham's present, they can. I wish to God . . . but what's the good? Kibblesham's gone; the others have gone, and I won't be long. It's what I'm . . . it's what I *might* be going to be . . . which scares the daylights out of me. Do you really want to know what happened to Verena . . .?" The waiter brought the drinks. I paid, and when the man had gone, Andy said, "Look, we'll finish this up, and you can come to my place. I've got furnished rooms at the back of this place, and there's something I'd like to show you. If *I* know, there's no reason why you shouldn't." He picked up his glass and drained it in one swallow—just like the Andy of the old days. I felt my heart lift at this evidence, slender as it was, that all of my old friend had not vanished in these strange changes which had overtaken him. "Know what a *gallus* is?"

"Isn't it an old-fashioned word for what the Americans call 'suspenders,' and we call 'braces'?"

"It's a certain kind of priest," said Andy. "'Gallus.' Come on, let's go back to my place. I'm sorry I tried to avoid you. I should have known you wouldn't take the brush-off. Anyway, you're old enough a friend to hear what happened to us all at Kibblesham Manor House."

"I know you remember everything of Kibblesham. We didn't, as you know, keep up a big establishment, but I want to emphasize that there were some fourteen or fifteen people coming or going about the house—I mean, besides ourselves and our guests—and never once did we have a single complaint that the house was haunted."

"*Was* it haunted?"

"Yes," said Andy. "Very haunted. Haunted in the worst possible way."

I was on exceedingly dangerous ground—my common-sense told me that. But my curiosity, at that moment, was stronger. I simply couldn't resist asking, "What's the

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worst possible way in which the dead can haunt a house?"

"When they're still alive," said Andy.

Outside an ice-cream van chimed its way along the quiet street. All the inhabitants of Worthing, on this sunny day, were by the sea. Except for the noise of the ice-cream man's chimes, dying away to a distant, elfin tinkling, a Sunday silence had fallen on the seaside town.

But inside the room, there was not only quiet, there was chill as well. I said, "We never got around to digging for that Roman villa."

"But Verena did," said Andy.

"Did she really!"

"And she found something. She thought they were a pair of Roman nutcrackers, and in a way," Andy said, with a wry, tortured grin, "that might have been one way of describing them. She cleaned them up with metal polish, and she got quite a polish on them, but in spite of that, Mother wouldn't ever touch them because 'you don't know where such things have been,' and Father because, though he'd faced practically every savage tribe in the world one way and another, he firmly believed that anything dug out of the earth which wasn't a vegetable was alive with what he called 'tetanus germs.' You couldn't have got the Governor to touch that object for a stack of five-pound notes."

"And you . . .?"

"I never touched them because Verena got a bit miffed that my people weren't more impressed with what she'd found, and in a huff she took them up to her room and put them in an old tea caddy in which she kept needles and cotton and that sort of thing. I was away at the time. Had I been at home, why yes, I almost certainly would have handled them. Why not? But I didn't. Verena put them away, and not until . . . until later . . . did I see them and realize what they were."

"What were they . . . ?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. What do you know of Cybele, the Great Mother?"

"Not much. Exotic religion, imported into Rome when—was it Hannibal?—threatened, and the oracle advised the Senate to have a word with the Idaean Mother. Doesn't Livy tell the story? The priests—here! Yes, I *do* remember!—the Galloi: Gauls, because no Roman was permitted to demean himself by becoming a priest of so outlandish a religion . . . screaming through the streets of Rome, gashing themselves, and dressed in women's clothing, and . . ."

And then I remembered why the ritual of Cybele, the Great Mother, used 'nutcrackers,' and what it was that they crushed.

"She put them into her workbox," said Andy, staring vacantly

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through the window, "and that night she heard the piping. You hear all sorts of noises in what they call 'the quiet of the countryside,' and all sound damned odd at night, and not a few sound damned frightening as well. But Vee was a level-headed girl, and she didn't pay too much attention to the piping, except that it kept her awake wondering what on earth it could be. She only thought she heard voices, chanting, that night—she wasn't sure, but what startled her was the dream which followed when she fell asleep at last.

"She was dancing down a street that she knew, in her dream, wasn't in Rome, but in London. The architecture was vaguely classical, but it had a homely sort of look, as though everything had been done on a fairly tight budget. It was definitely provincial, but quite grand, nevertheless. The streets were lined with dense crowds, and she was dancing with a lot of other men, all dressed as women. Only Vee wasn't dressed as a woman; she was still dressed as a man. . . ."

"Why the change? Men dressed as women; women dressed as men. . . ."

"Oh," said Andy, as though I'd missed a simple point. "Vee was dressed as a man because she *was* a man. Still a *man*, I mean. She was gashing her arms like the others and screaming out, 'Io! Io! Magne Mater! Mater Omnium! Mater Omnium Deorum!'—and in some odd fashion, she seemed to be something special in the procession. People looked at her differently, and some made signs as she came near. She felt she was someone—something—special, but what that was, she didn't know. So she went on slashing herself, and flinging the blood over herself and over the people standing by. She remembered that she had been at some special ceremony and was bound for another. The procession came to London Bridge and went into a temple alongside the northern entrance to the bridge. The rest was a bit shadowy, but she remembered being led down some steps to a boat, rowed by sailors, but with a single sail. There was a procession of boats up the River, until they all came to a place that she thinks must have been about where Maidenhead is now. Then there were more celebrations, and another walk, and then they were all taken in creaking bullock-carts to Kibblesham—the Settlement of Cybele. And there," said Andy, "her initiation should have ended."

"*Should* have ended . . . ?"

"Well, poor Vee couldn't quite remember that bit . . . it was all in a dream, you understand . . . and some details were sharp and clear, and others were dim and a bit shadowy. But she got the sense that if she did something that she

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had to do—some tremendous obligation, a test, a ritual—something terrific would happen to her. And then, she told me, she had an overwhelming sense of having failed someone—failed that someone, and failed herself. You know how fond she used to be of Tennyson? Well, she said she felt as Sir Bedivere must have felt when he found that he had failed in his duty. Like that."

"What had she failed to do . . . ?"

"The next night," said Andy, as though I hadn't spoken, "she heard the piping again. But this time, she heard clearly the voices—the chanting that she had thought she'd heard on the previous night. The words were the same as those that she'd heard in her dream. They were calling on the Great Mother . . . and they sounded near. Very near, indeed. It was at that point," said Andy, staring down at his great freckled hands, "that she began to change.

"Every night," he continued, "she dreamt of the *Galloi*—the priests of Cybele. Every night she expected to become one of them—and every damned night she failed to do something or other, which prevented her actually joining them. She remembered a lot—in her dream, of course—of what had happened to her earlier. She had seen other people undergo the *taurobolium*—where they used to stand under a grating, whilst a bull was killed above: a baptism of blood. She saw the crushers being used, and learned, she said, how to weave the screams into the melody that she was jangling out with her *sistrum*. But though, in her dream, she was a man, no one used the crushers on her—nor would they, she told me, until she had passed the Final Test. She couldn't tell me then what it was . . . and I'd no idea. Have you?"

"No. What did you mean, Andy, when you said just now that she began to change. I heard a funny story . . . could it possibly have come from the servants. I heard that Verena had changed her sex."

Andy shook his head.

"If it had been only that!"

"Then what did change?"

"She herself."

"I don't quite understand you. She was Verena . . . the Verena whom we both knew and liked. What did she become?"

"She became what the Chosen Ones became . . . she became the Great Mother Herself. . . ."

I stared at my old friend in horror. He had talked of the 'very special home' to which Verena had gone to die—but for what 'very special home' did this lunacy to which I was now listening qualify *him*.

He stared at me, and reached down into the 'poacher's pocket' of his tweed hacking jacket.

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"Know what these are?" he said, casually. He reached over, and before I knew what I had done, I had unthinkingly accepted a pair of rust-stained forceps, the arms of which were set with tiny heads, amongst which I recognized those of some Roman gods. "They're the forceps used for the ritual castration—when the novice, having passed his tests, made the final renunciation of his manhood to the Great Mother. Henceforward, having lost his manhood, having sacrificed the severed parts to Cybele, he would no longer be a man. He would dress as a woman; speak as a woman; use the places reserved for women. On the Day of the Great Mother, he would come out into Rome, and all the other cities of the Empire where the Great Mother was worshipped, and down the streets he'd run and dance, gashing himself, scourging himself. . . ."

"Why?" I wondered. "Why on earth did they do it?"

"Eh?" said Andy, as though I had asked a question whose answer was obvious. "Why, *for the rewards*, of course."

I gulped. How much of all this wild stuff that Andy was talking had a basis in fact? Did *any* of it have a basis in fact?

Andy was mumbling now—and I had to strain my ears to catch the words.

"Great rewards, though," he muttered, "don't come to one except for having done great acts. Only a few could ever find the strength to go through with it . . . with the trials, I mean . . . and the tests . . . and the final renunciation. But," Andy continued, staring through the window with unseeing eyes, "castration and all that were nothing, really, compared with the greater renunciations. . . ."

"The greater renunciations . . . ?"

"Why, yes," he turned towards me, faintly astonished that I should have cared to reveal my ignorance. "Castration, transvestism, squeaky voice, self-wounding and so on . . . these are merely *physical* renunciations. The Great Mother, in return for the rewards that She alone could give, demanded renunciations far more important than these. Dehumanization called for a complete break with all one's past, with all one's *mores*, with all social traditions and obligations. Particularly it called for the complete severance of family ties."

"Well, yes," I said, desperately striving to introduce even the semblance of normality into our conversation, "but don't all religions call for the break with one's family?"

"The Great Mother wanted something more than that the Chosen Ones should say good-bye to their family ties. She wanted

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something a great deal more positive. A great deal more final. Something which would *prove* the neophyte's sincerity. Something so *horrible*—so against nature—that the very act of doing it would not only prove the neophyte's sincerity, but would cut him off forever from humankind. Only then could he enter into the Goddess—become one with her. Become Her, indeed."

"Something so horrible . . ." I whispered. "What could be so horrible that one would dehumanize oneself in the very act of doing it? What sin against the Holy Ghost could it be which would prevent one's ever becoming human again?"

"There's a moral in that story of Arthur's taking the sword out of the stone. The sword was for him—for him only. Yet, the moment that he had got the sword, he was the King. The forceps . . . the forceps have the same sort of power. . . ."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my blood running cold in panic fear of I knew not what.

"They are the instrument of the priest, but they are, in a fashion I don't quite understand, the controller of the priest. *No one can handle them and ever be the same again.*"

I stared down in horror at the rusty object in my hands, and cast it violently from me.

"It doesn't matter now," said Andy, in a tired voice. "What you and I want doesn't matter. We are the slayers and the slain. We are the priests and the victims. We are the sacrifice and the Goddess herself. I don't know . . . but when I heard Father scream like that . . . scream, scream, *scream* . . . I knew that he was the very special sacrifice, and that, in using the forceps on Father, Verena was proving that she could perform the act which would cut her off from all humanity.

"I don't know whether Father ever realized what had happened. He wasn't a young man, but he was physically very strong. He said nothing . . . after that terrible scream. Mother was in her own room, and Father—God knows how he did it—said that he'd had a terrible nightmare when Mother came in to see what the noise was all about.

"He saw Dr. Lawrence—and you know that country doctors aren't like the modern city boys: the country doctors *still* don't talk. They fixed up a crack plastic surgeon, and repaired the damage to Father. Then, a few months later, behind a door on which the locks had been changed, Father committed suicide, without fuss, without scandal."

"How on earth did he do that?"

"He was a diabetic . . . I don't suppose you knew that? Well, he was. So all that he had to do was to 'forget' to take his in-

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sulin, fall into the diabetic coma, and die. He left it to me to see that Verena was dealt with suitably . . . poor old Governor! What an end! To be castrated by one's own daughter . . . no wonder he was glad to die!"

I was swamped in the horror of the tale, whether or not it were true. If true, it passed the bounds of decent terror; if untrue, it marked the depths to which Andy's madness had plunged. But suppose that it *were* true . . . ?

Still striving to get this insanity back on to a rational basis, if such a thing sound not too absurd, I managed to choke out: "But Verena wasn't a man. She was a woman. I thought the *Galloi* were all men . . . ?"

"Not all," said Andy. "There were exceptions. Verena was Chosen. It didn't matter what she had been at the beginning, and in the end her original sex mattered not a bit. After she'd ceased to be human, she became what the Great Mother changed her to. That's what killed Mother. I forgot to keep Verena's door locked, and Mother walked in. I'd told her that Verena wanted no one to see her but me, but . . . well, you know what Mother was. She walked in, saw what was lying in Verena's bed, and collapsed. Dr. Lawrence shot her full of sedatives, and—fortunately for poor Mother—she died. That's when I decided to get Verena off to a very special home. Dr. Lawrence arranged that, too. Verena hasn't long. She might as well be where people are paid a great deal of money to have nerves of steel . . . it isn't any everyday nurse who can face the sight of the Great Mother and stay even half sane. I know," he added, "because I've seen Her. . . .

"You are trying to ask me where I stand in all this," said Andy, with a wan smile. "I'm not a Chosen One. I'm just a simple priest . . . a *Gallos*."

And then, for all the horror that I had known, came the most terrible experience of all.

"I must get out of these clothes," Andy said. "*She* isn't served best in this kind of clothing." And, opening a drawer, he began to take out filmy, lace-trimmed garments of silk . . .

That was six weeks ago. I got out of Andy's rooms somehow, and stumbled down the stairs into the blessed dust and sunlight of the Worthing back street.

The horror persisted, but, like all other human emotions, even horror dims a bit with time. After a fortnight or so, I found that I could think, without shuddering, on all that Andy had told me. I began to feel a strong impulse to revisit Kibbleswell and see how total had been the changes wrought by the nuns who had bought the property.

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There were changes indeed! Not merely in the land on which Kibbleswell Manor House had once stood, but in the village—now the town—of Kibbleswell itself. Kibbleswell had become as faceless, as characterless, as any other London suburb.

Where Kibbleswell Manor House had stood, with its meadows and paddocks and stabling and ponds and kitchen gardens and rose-walks, now rose an eight-story block of flats above a four story strip of shops with flats above.

The new convent, of mixed glass and shining concrete, stood isolated in the midst of its asphalted playgrounds, and the noise of children's voices came loud and clear across the open space. Then the children filed into their classrooms, and I heard one nun call to another, "Oh, Sister Francis Xavier, will you be taking the French class this afternoon?"—and the younger nun answered, "Yes, Mother."

Mother . . . but in what a different context was the word used here! Bright, clean, airy buildings, even though designed without imagination, were better raised where an ancient evil had once had possession—and the nuns' innocence would keep that evil forever at bay. The multiple-stores were filled with shoppers, all making their small and ordinary purchases. Andy's horrors . . . and the touch of the rusted forceps . . . seemed curiously remote. I felt the terror of the night slipping from me, as though I had been suddenly released from the bondage of a nightmare not of this world.

The silence of a suburban lunchtime descended on the new Kibbleswell. The shops closed, the children went into their midday 'dinner.' Even the dogs retired for either a meal or a sleep.

I got into the car, and was about to start up, when I heard it.

I sat, frozen, trying to tell myself that what I had heard was nothing—the wind in a television antenna (except that there was no wind on that still day), that an errand boy was whistling (save that there was no errand boy), that it was the song of a bird (save that, now, there were no more trees, and no more birds to sing at Kibblesham). I waited, remembering what Andy had said about those who even touched the forceps of the Great Mother.

I did not have to wait long. This place was consecrated to a force from which a little modern rebuilding could hardly drive it—both Andy and I had been foolish to believe that the Ancient Mysteries may be expelled from their Ancient Places.

I did not start the car. I sat in the noonday silence of Kibblesham and waited.

The piping had begun. . . .

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BOOKS

UNLIKE THE LITTLE GIRL WITH the curl, science fiction is usually neither very, very good nor very, very horrid. Moreover, as it has in other fields, the vocabulary of praise has become so overblown that a simple "good" means, more often than not, "don't bother," while "brilliant—magnificent—unequalled" means only that the book in question won't kill you.

A good book from Doubleday is PAVANE by Keith Roberts ($4.95), about whom a reader ought to know more than is provided on the dust jacket. Keith Roberts is an Englishman and was associate editor with *Science Fantasy*, but what Doubleday does not mention—and what I do not therefore know—is whether PAVANE is Mr. Roberts' first book or not. There are weaknesses and limitations in the book that mean little if the writer is simply inexperienced but a good deal more if he's not; and there is a fine imagination that would be a respectable achievement for an experienced writer, but is a much greater promise for a beginner.

PAVANE is an alternate-universe book: in 1588 Queen Elizabeth I was assassinated; therefore Spain conquered England, Protestantism was destroyed in Northern Europe, and Europe and the New World remained under the control of a repressive Church. Mr. Roberts does not make the mistake of confounding the sixteenth century with the twelfth, or of seeing a slowly developing society as static; one of the best ideas in the book is that technological progress, although slowed down, has not disappeared. Twentieth-century England has steam locomotives (eighty horsepower), a middle class, the typewriter (a rare luxury), Zeiss binoculars, primitive radio, and a social system that is not just an excuse for romance, sadism, or adventurous nonsense. The author's feeling for historical period is impressive, perhaps not in every technological detail (internal combustion, yes; nylons, no) but certainly in his unshakable assumption that leather clothes and porridge do not an idiot make, and in the extraordinary, half-expressed melancholy of a society that became static *after*

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the Renaissance. It is a kind of Paradise Lost.

The alternate-universe story is subject to a particular weakness: the pleasure of feeling morally daring, of being "ahead" of a purposely benighted society. Mr. Roberts doesn't entirely avoid this. In general, though, his weaknesses (and he has them) only mar details here and there; they don't cut deep enough to hurt the story. PAVANE is a real, detailed, self-contained world, affecting and convincing. To an Englishman who is familiar with every town, every road, every seacoast, every forest (or vanished forest) in the book, it must be a poignant novel indeed.

Moreover, Keith Roberts is a real writer. By this I mean that he dwells on things for their own sakes, that he doesn't conceive of the details of his book as merely a means to get from point A to point B with as little sweat as possible (and with some superficially attractive tinsel thrown in). One feels that he would discard his plot instantly if the characters and the world decided to develop in some other direction; it is this risk that makes a book live. This is worth mentioning in a field that seems to conceive "good writing" (or "style") as either an irritating distraction or a mysterious gift before which we ought to be simultaneously awed and a little contemptuous. Style is respect for real life. The characters in PAVANE have visions—real visions—of things like fairies—real fairies—and the visions turn out to be true. I don't approve of or find likely the view that we are only instruments of a Higher Purpose, but Keith Roberts believes it. He does not believe it polemically, which would kill it; he presents it poetically, as a real experience. PAVANE has the suggestive power science fiction so often lacks; the most important points in the book are not the most important points of the plot, and at its best, the novel has that lyrical meaning that is so easy to feel and so hard to explain. "Do not grieve for the deaths of stones," says a father to his son,* and here is an adolescent fisher girl, of minor importance to the plot but of major importance to herself:

"Sometimes then the headlands would seem to sway gently and roll like the sea, dizzying. Becky would squat and rub her arms and shiver, wait for the spells to pass and worry about death . . ."†

Frederik Pohl's THE AGE OF THE PUSSYFOOT (Trident, $4.95) is likely to suffer in this review, not because I think it bad, but because there is not much inspiring to say about its goodness. The book has one rare quality, what might be called Not Shoving Your Nose In It; Mr. Pohl assumes

* *p. 278*
† *p. 102*

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a certain intelligence in his readers and forbears giving them careful analyses of his future world when a glancing detail will do. It is good, for a change, to be treated as an adult by an adult. The book is intelligent, quite funny, stuffed full of charming things, fast-moving and decently predictive; it is probably better than 99% of everything else written in the field this year. Mr. Pohl has points to make and he makes them, sometimes gracefully, sometimes with genuine wit, a few times a little awkwardly (but I'm willing to blame his editors). You may even forget, while you are reading the book, that the book is dead.

Perhaps this shouldn't be held against the author. Satire always suffers (or gains) from the intrusive author, and what may be at fault here is that the author isn't intrusive enough; one of the pleasantest moments in the book (one feels a positive glow of affection for Mr. Pohl) is the last two sentences, in which the author sticks his head through the page and waves at you. PUSSYFOOT is polished, professional, straight-forward, and all on the surface. It even has detachable ideas in it, about which you can argue afterward. (Some people will think this makes the book profound, though to my mind what makes a book profound is the undetachability of its ideas—you spend much time trying to define them before you even reach the stage of being able to argue about them.) PUSSYFOOT is one of the best disposable books I have seen in a long time and good enough so that I wish Mr. Pohl had let himself go all the way. One example: at the end of Chapter Sixteen is a grim version of Goldilocks that turns from melodramatic horror to earnest school lesson to dramatic performance. For a moment something follows the laws of its own quirky nature, and that damned plot can wait.

The novel seems to me to have had more impact at its magazine publication in 1965 than it does today, the penalty of writing topical, i.e. disposable novels. There are few flaws once you accept the major premise that the book is comfortably dead: Mr. Pohl suggests in his Afterword that the book ought to be set one century in the future and not several, and he is right. There is also an unexplained difficulty with the indoctrination of the hero, Forrester, who has died in our age and is revived in the future. (Why do science-fiction authors always call characters by their last names?) If he has learned the—presumably—changed language, why is it so hard to teach him the elementary facts of social life? Readers will also note that, although people may be frozen and unfrozen at will, though we may travel to Sirius, men will still earn more money than women and that free en-

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terprise and the suburban housewife will go on forever.

Frank Herbert is an interesting writer, or perhaps I should say an interesting phenomenon, for both DUNE and THE SANTAROGA BARRIER (Berkley, 75¢) are not first-rate books, but carefully worked up third-rate ones. The exhaustive care with which the working up is done deserves praise, but many a reader of DUNE has thought himself responding to the profundity of an elemental vision of life when what really got him was a combination of reckless exoticism, flamboyantly impossible social conditions, sheer thoroughness, and what I can most politely call megalomania. THE SANTAROGA BARRIER, while not a good book, has the quality that amateur acting companies sometimes achieve: a kind of evenness, so that while nothing is really good or striking, nothing shows anything else up. DUNE fans will be disappointed.

SANTAROGA is the story of a "consciousness fuel" (a consciousness-expanding drug) seen from a conservative point of view. That is, the drug has created a conservative, yet dangerous, community —the author makes his drug quite unlike LSD, on purpose. The book is full of nineteenth-century hotel lobbies, thirty-year-old cars, waitresses, crusty doctors—what might be called American Nostalgic. The oddity of the novel is in marrying this kind of "Spartan" community (Mr. Herbert's description) to a consciousness-expanding drug. What power the novel has is the power of exhaustive detail; there is, for example, so much food in the book (usually the community's cheese, which is sometimes tangy and sometimes smooth and sometimes rich and sometimes all three at once) that you read it after dinner at your peril. The food is not described well, but it is there in heaps; similarly the people, though they do pages and pages of accurately commonplace things, are pure cardboard, and the hero's psychedelic experiences compel me to assume that Mr. Herbert has neither experience in the field nor imagination enough to fake it. Here is the hero, thinking about his sweetheart and another character:

"*Jenny,* he thought. *Jenny . . . Jenny . . .*" (p. 16.) ". . . *Jenny . . . Jenny . . .*" (same page, five paragraphs later.) "Dasein moved down the steps. Piaget . . . Piaget . . ." (p. 65.) ". . . a fiery pain through his shoulder. Piaget . . . Piaget . . ." (p. 66.)

After a good deal of unnecessary mystification and traveling into the Santaroga Valley and out of the Santaroga Valley, for no apparent reason except to rack up pages, the novel ends where a

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good novel would begin. There are interesting glimpses of behind-the-scenes Santaroga, which Mr. Herbert does not develop. The book has the doubtful virtue of persuading you on every page that although nothing worthwhile is happening at present, something surely will if you only go on reading. It also has the air of treating its materials seriously, although the problems it broaches are never explored or elaborated on. What is reality? Are socially shared delusions normal? Don't ask Mr. Herbert. Interested parties can read SYNTHAJOY, a book with the same plot (psychological entrapment) and exactly the same twist at the end, to see how even a flawed novel can attempt to provide answers to questions and not just display the questions triumphantly on the last page but one.

When the British are bad, they are awful. TRANSPLANT by Margaret Jones (Stein and Day, $5.95) is about a dying painter who has his head cut off and stuck on someone else's body, and this other guy likes sex, see, but this poor ascetic guy just wants to paint and he's abnormal because he likes it and his wife won't even look at him because she thinks he's dead, so—

Actually the book is far less coherent than the above. As far as I can make out, it's about adultery and consequent guilt feelings, or poetic justice (the painter's paintings are thrown into a river by the tart he's keeping just for brutish sex), but the medical—not to say, scientific—not to say, simply logical—fallacies in the book beggar description. Miss Jones can write convincing, realistic, single scenes, but she cannot make them add up to anything, so that the utter idiocy of the whole proceeding becomes apparent only gradually. She ought to get out of science fiction and write ordinary novels; there is a lot of gritty, nasty, sordid, dull, English (?) life (?) in the book, including a view of sex that makes the worst American squalor look glamorous. After her third or fourth novel, Miss Jones might be able to manage a whole book and it might even be worth reading, but publishing TRANSPLANT is stupid at best, and at worst, downright insulting.

OMAR by Wilfrid Blunt (Doubleday, $3.95) is "A fantasy for animal lovers." It is pleasant, charming and slight. It is a fantasy in the old-fashioned sense (say, talking badgers) and if your sugar tolerance is low, stay away. I liked it.

—JOANNA RUSS

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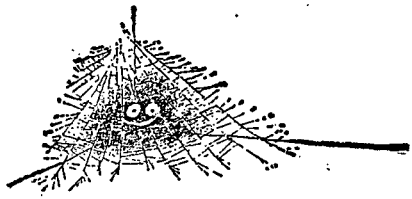

THE DARK CORNER

For those poorly read in the literature of the godawful, and there are far too many of you about, I recommend, without hesitation, two dandy new starter anthologies in the field: HAUNTINGS, TALES OF THE SUPERNATURAL, edited by Henry Mazzeo (Doubleday, $4.50), and STRANGE BEASTS AND UNNATURAL MONSTERS, edited by Phillip Van Doren Stern (Fawcett Crest, 60¢).

HAUNTINGS, etc., has the grand advantage of being illustrated by the beloved Edward Gorey —he of the darkened hall, the whispy lady in a faint, and the mustachioed neurotic. While the interior drawings are not quite Gorey in top form, the cover is a must for anyone even slightly fond of revenants. The stories count among them such solid, and oft-reprinted, classics as Lovecraft's *In The Vault,* M. R. James' *The Haunted Doll's House,* Wakefield's *The Red Lolge,* Mrs. Olliphant's (you never heard of Mrs. Olliphant?) *The Open Door,* Collier's *Thus I Refute Beelzy;* and if you are unfamiliar with any of them, I suggest it is high time to get cracking. Perhaps too late. The only stories new to me were a haunted house tale by Manly Wade Wellman and a Faustian item by a Robert Aickman. The first struck me as being a weak choice from a good writer's work; the second is a corker. It's called *The Visiting Star,* is a marvelous account of sinister doings associated with a provincial theatrical troupe, and marks, says the anthologist, Mr. Aickman's first appearance in this country. I sincerely hope it won't be his last.

STRANGE BEASTS, etc., has more of an excuse for containing heavily used material as it's a limited subject affair, but Phillip Van Doren Stern manages to sneak in enough new horrors to make me wish the thing had been bound in hard covers. My copy has developed serious curls at the corners and there is a spreading wrinkly area on its back. Soon it will all fall apart like Count Dracula's corpse. The last offering in the book, *The Elephant Man,* is a true account of a poor, deformed son of a bitch which will at least

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bring you close to tears. For the beginner, there are such basics as E. F. Benson's *Mrs. Amworth* (you never heard of Mrs. Amworth?), du Maurier's *The Birds,* and Stoker's *The Judge's House.* You wouldn't want not to have read those, now, would you?

Arkham House has brought out a collection of stories by Nelson Bond (NIGHTMARES AND DAYDREAMS, $5.00), taken mostly from *Blue Book* magazine. I have never gone much for Mr. Bond's work; I'm not sure just why. It may have been overexposure to a wildly popular story of his, *Mr. Mergenthwirker's Lobblies,* back in the forties. Even the title of the thing is a good example of a species of whimsey which makes me, an ordinarily genial and easygoing sort, redden and swear. Then he uses a kind of wisecracking humor which irks me to a foolish extent. Then, I won't go on and on, something about his plots, their neatness, perhaps, has always irritated me beyond a reasonable point. Put my whole attitude down to a personal quirk, if you will, and buy the book. But if the idea of a Mr. Mergenthwriker running around with a bunch of lobblies puts you off, go pick up a collection of Ambrose Bierce, instead.

Weird Tales went bi-monthly in 1940, shrunk to half its size in '53, vanished altogether the following year, and life just hasn't seemed the same since for the odd little band that read it, not to mention the odd little band that wrote it. It's easy to see why no one rushed in to fill the gap. Weird Fantasy does not attract the Hearsts and the Luces of the publishing world, because the Hearsts and the Luces are interested in making a buck, and weird fantasy is a loser. Poverty dogs it. The story behind any science fiction magazine's struggle to survive is heroic, but the saga of *Weird Tales'* constantly losing battle to turn a profit borders on the ridiculous. No sane investor would touch such a project. This is why I feel sorry for Paul and Ronald Willis. They are, respectively, the editor and publisher of *Anubis,* a new magazine devoted to weird fiction and to articles on weird fiction. It comes out four times a year (they've made it through three, gang), is probably printed with some hand-cranked device in their basement, and it gets better by the issue. Some of the stories they've published have been pretty fierce, but then some of them have been pretty damned good. They even managed to snag the likes of Roger Zelazny and E. Hoffman Price (who wrote a fascinating essay on Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales*) for their third number, so you can see they're not just sitting around. They're planning a Clark Ashton Smith issue soon, and I, for one, am looking

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forward to it. If any of this turns you on, or moves you toward compassion, why not drop them a line? It's $2.00 a year ($2.50 overseas, if you happen to be reading this overseas. What are you doing overseas?), and you send it to: The Golden Goblin Press, Box 323, Arlington, Virginia 22210. Name me another magazine which would give a free plug like *that* to a competitor!

—GAHAN WILSON

BOOKS RECEIVED

FICTION

THE LION OF COMARRE and AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT, Arthur C. Clarke, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, 214 pp., $4.75

SMALL CHANGES, Hal Clement, Doubleday 1969, 230 pp., $4.95

SPACEPAW, Gordon Dickson, Putnam 1969, 224 pp., $3.75

THE SWORD SWALLOWER, Ron Goulart, Doubleday 1968, 181 pp., $4.50

TRANSPLANT, Margaret Jones, Stein and Day 1968, 224 pp., $5.95

THE TOUCH, Daniel Keyes, Harcourt, Brace & World 1968, 215 pp., $4.75

100 YEARS OF SCIENCE FICTION, Damon Knight, ed., Simon and Schuster 1968, 384 pp., $6.50

RETIEF AND THE WARLORDS, Keith Laumer, Doubleday 1968, 188 pp., $4.50

DARK PIPER, Andre Norton, Harcourt, Brace & World 1968, 249 pp., $4.25

THE SECOND IF READER OF SCIENCE FICTION, Frederik Pohl, ed., Doubleday 1968, 239 pp., $4.95

PAVANE, Keith Roberts, Doubleday 1968, 279 pp., $4.95

NEBULA AWARD STORIES THREE, Roger Zelazny, ed., Doubleday 1968, 272 pp., $4.95

GENERAL

THE PROMETHEUS PROJECT, Gerald Feinberg, Doubleday 1969, 215 pp., $4.95

AN ADVENTURER'S GUIDE TO NUMBER THEORY, Richard Friedberg, McGraw-Hill 1968, 228 pp., $5.95

THE NEW FORTUNE IN YOUR HAND, Elizabeth Daniels Squire, Fleet 1968, 256 pp., $6.50

THE INDEX TO THE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES, 1967, $1.00 (This is a supplement to the very useful INDEX TO THE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES, 1951-1965, compiled by Erwin S. Strauss, $8.00. Both are available from: New England Science Fiction Association, Box G, MIT Branch Station, Cambridge, Mass. 02139. 1966 and 1968 supplements were in preparation in late 1968 and may now be available.)

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"I tell you, Shirley, there's something funny about this place!"

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The decline of civilization, as begun by a battle between a swordsman who understood nothing and a sorcerer who knew a great and terrible truth . . .

NOT LONG BEFORE THE END

by Larry Niven

A SWORDSMAN BATTLED A SORcerer, once upon a time.

In that age such battles were frequent. A natural antipathy exists between swordsmen and sorcerers, as between cats and small birds, or between rats and men. Usually the swordsman lost, and humanity's average intelligence rose some trifling fraction. Sometimes the swordsman won, and again the species was improved; for a sorcerer who cannot kill one miserable swordsman is a poor excuse for a sorcerer.

But this battle differed from the others. On one side, the sword itself was enchanted. On the other, the sorcerer knew a great and terrible truth.

We will call him the Warlock, as his name is both forgotten and impossible to pronounce. His parents had known what they were about. He who knows your name has power over you, but he must speak your name to use it.

The Warlock had found his terrible truth in middle age.

By that time he had traveled widely. It was not from choice. It was simply that he was a powerful magician, and he used his power, and he needed friends.

He knew spells to make people love a magician. The Warlock had tried these, but he did not like the side effects. So he commonly used his great power to help those around him, that they might love him without coercion.

He found that when he had been ten to fifteen years in a place, using his magic as whim dictated, his powers would weaken. If he moved away, they returned. Twice he had had to move, and twice he

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had settled in a new land, learned new customs, made new friends. It happened a third time, and he prepared to move again. But something set him to wondering.

Why should a man's powers be so unfairly drained out of him?

It happened to nations too. Throughout history, those lands which had been richest in magic had been overrun by barbarians carrying swords and clubs. It was a sad truth, and one that did not bear thinking about, but the Warlock's curiosity was strong.

So he wondered, and he stayed to perform certain experiments.

His last experiment involved a simple kinetic sorcery set to spin a metal disc in midair. And when that magic was done, he knew a truth he could never forget.

So he departed. In succeeding decades he moved again and again. Time changed his personality, if not his body, and his magic became more dependable, if less showy. He had discovered a great and terrible truth, and if he kept it secret, it was through compassion. His truth spelled the end of civilization, yet it was of no earthly use to anyone.

So he thought. But some five decades later (the date was on the order of 12,000 B.C.) it occurred to him that all truths find a use somewhere, sometime. And so he built another disc and recited spells over it, so that (like a telephone number already dialed but for one digit) the disc would be ready if ever he needed it.

The name of the sword was Glirendree. It was several hundred years old, and quite famous.

As for the swordsman, his name is no secret. It was Belhap Sattlestone Wirldess ag Miracloat roo Cononson. His friends, who tended to be temporary, called him Hap. He was a barbarian, of course. A civilized man would have had more sense than to touch Glirendree, and better morals than to stab a sleeping woman. Which was how Hap had acquired his sword. Or vice versa.

The Warlock recognized it long before he saw it. He was at work in the cavern he had carved beneath a hill, when an alarm went off. The hair rose up, tingling, along the back of his neck. "Visitors," he said.

"I don't hear anything," said Sharla, but there was an uneasiness to her tone. Sharla was a girl of the village who had come to live with the Warlock. That day she had persuaded the Warlock to teach her some of his simpler spells.

"Don't you feel the hair rising on the back of your neck? I set the alarm to do that. Let me just check . . ." He used a sensor like a silver hula hoop set on edge. "There's trouble coming. Sharla, we've got to get you out of here."

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"But . . ." Sharla waved protestingly at the table where they had been working.

"Oh, that. We can quit in the middle. That spell isn't dangerous." It was a charm against love-spells, rather messy to work, but safe and tame and effective. The Warlock pointed at the spear of light glaring through the hoop-sensor. "That's dangerous. An enormously powerful focus of mana power is moving up the west side of the hill. You go down the east side."

"Can I help? You've taught me *some* magic."

The magician laughed a little nervously. "Against that? That's Glirendree. Look at the size of the image, the color, the shape. No. You get out of here, and right now. The hill's clear on the eastern slope."

"Come with me."

"I can't. Not with Glirendree loose. Not when it's already got hold of some idiot. There are obligations."

They came out of the cavern together, into the mansion they shared. Sharla, still protesting, donned a robe and started down the hill. The Warlock hastily selected an armload of paraphernalia and went outside.

The intruder was halfway up the hill: a large but apparently human being carrying something long and glittering. He was still a quarter of an hour downslope. The Warlock set up the silver hula hoop and looked through it.

The sword was a flame of mana discharge, an eye-hurting needle of white light. Glirendree, right enough. He knew of other, equally powerful mana foci, but none were portable, and none would show as a sword to the unaided eye.

He should have told Sharla to inform the Brotherhood. She had that much magic. Too late now.

There was no colored borderline to the spear of light.

No green fringe effect meant no protective spells. The swordsman had not tried to guard himself against what he carried. Certainly the intruder was no magician, and he had not the intelligence to get the help of a magician. Did he know *nothing* about Glirendree?

Not that that would help the Warlock. He who carries Glirendree was invulnerable to any power save Glirendree itself. Or so it was said.

"Let's test that," said the Warlock to himself. He dipped into his armload of equipment and came up with something wooden, shaped like an ocarina. He blew the dust off it, raised it in his fist and pointed it down the mountain. But he hesitated.

The loyalty spell was simple and safe, but it did have side effects. It lowered its victim's intelligence.

"Self-defense," the Warlock re-

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minded himself, and blew into the ocarina.

The swordsman did not break stride. Glirendree didn't even glow; it had absorbed the spell that easily.

In minutes the swordsman would be here. The Warlock hurriedly set up a simple prognostics spell. At least he could learn who would win the coming battle.

No picture formed before him. The scenery did not even waver.

"Well, now," said the Warlock. "*Well,* now!" And he reached into his clutter of sorcerous tools and found a metal disc. Another instant's rummaging produced a double-edged knife, profusely inscribed in no known language, and very sharp.

At the top of the Warlock's hill was a spring, and the stream from that spring ran past the Warlock's house. The swordsman stood leaning on his sword, facing the Warlock across that stream. He breathed deeply, for it had been a hard climb.

He was powerfully muscled and profusely scarred. To the Warlock it seemed strange that so young a man should have found time to acquire so many scars. But none of his wounds had impaired motor functions. The Warlock had watched him coming up the hill. The swordsman was in top physical shape.

His eyes were deep blue and brilliant, and half an inch too close together for the Warlock's taste.

"I am Hap," he called across the stream. "Where is she?"

"You mean Sharla, of course. But why is that your concern?"

"I have come to free her from her shameful bondage, old man. Too long have you—"

"Hey, hey, hey. Sharla's my *wife.*"

"Too long have you used her for your vile and lecherous purposes. Too—"

"She stays of her own free will, you nit!"

"You expect me to believe that? As lovely a woman as Sharla, could she love an old and feeble warlock?"

"Do I look feeble?"

The Warlock did not look like an old man. He seemed Hap's age, some twenty years old, and his frame and his musculature were the equal of Hap's. He had not bothered to dress as he left the cavern. In place of Hap's scars, his back bore a tattoo in red and green and gold, an elaborately curlicued pentagramic design, almost hypnotic in its extradimensional involutions.

"Everyone in the village knows your age," said Hap. "You're two hundred years old, if not more."

"Hap," said the Warlock. "Belhap something-or-other roo Cononson. Now I remember. Sharla told me you tried to bother her last time

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she went to the village. I should have done something about it then."

"Old man, you lie. Sharla is under a spell. Everybody knows the power of a warlock's loyalty spell."

"I don't use them. I don't like the side effects. Who wants to be surrounded by friendly morons?" The Warlock pointed to Glirendree. "Do you know what you carry?"

Hap nodded ominously.

"Then you ought to know better. Maybe it's not too late. See if you can transfer it to your left hand."

"I tried that. I can't let go of it." Hap cut at the air, restlessly, with his sixty pounds of sword. "I have to sleep with the damned thing clutched in my hand."

"Well, it's too late then."

"It's worth it," Hap said grimly. "For now I can kill you. Too long has an innocent woman been subjected to your lecherous—"

"I know, I know." The Warlock changed languages suddenly, speaking high and fast. He spoke thus for almost a minute, then switched back to Rynaldese. "Do you feel any pain?"

"Not a twinge," said Hap. He had not moved. He stood with his remarkable sword at the ready, glowering at the magician across the stream.

"No sudden urge to travel? Attacks of remorse? Change of body temperature?" But Hap was grinning now, not at all nicely. "I thought not. Well, it had to be tried."

There was an instant of blinding light.

When it reached the vicinity of the hill, the meteorite had dwindled to the size of a baseball. It should have finished its journey at the back of Hap's head. Instead, it exploded a millisecond too soon. When the light had died, Hap stood within a ring of craterlets.

The swordsman's unsymmetrical jaw dropped, and then he closed his mouth and started forward. The sword hummed faintly.

The Warlock turned his back.

Hap curled his lip at the Warlock's cowardice. Then he jumped three feet backward from a standing start. A shadow had pulled itself from the Warlock's back.

In a lunar cave with the sun glaring into its mouth, a man's shadow on the wall might have looked that sharp and black. The shadow dropped to the ground and stood up, a humanoid outline that was less a shape than a window view of the ultimate blackness beyond the death of the universe. Then it leapt.

Glirendree seemed to move of its own accord. It hacked the demon once lengthwise and once across, while the demon seemed to batter against an invisible shield, trying to reach Hap even as it died.

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"Clever," Hap panted. "A pentagram on your back, a demon trapped inside."

"That's clever," said the Warlock, "but it didn't work. Carrying Glirendree works, but it's not clever. I ask you again, do you know what you carry?"

"The most powerful sword ever forged." Hap raised the weapon high. His right arm was more heavily muscled than his left, and inches longer, as if Glirendree had been at work on it. "A sword to make me the equal of any warlock or sorceress, and without the help of demons, either. I had to kill a woman who loved me to get it, but I paid that price gladly. When I have sent you to your just reward, Sharla will come to me—"

"She'll spit in your eye. Now will you listen to me? Glirendree *is* a demon. If you had an ounce of sense, you'd cut your arm off at the elbow."

Hap looked startled. "You mean there's a demon imprisoned in the metal?"

"Get it through your head. *There is no metal.* It's a demon, a bound demon, and it's a parasite. It'll age you to death in a year unless you cut it loose. A warlock of the northlands imprisoned it in its present form, then gave it to one of his bastards, Jeery of Something-or-other. Jeery conquered half this continent before he died on the battlefield, of senile decay. It was given into the charge of the Rainbow Witch a year before I was born, because there never was a woman who had less use for people, especially men."

"That happens to have been untrue."

"Probably Glirendree's doing. Started her glands up again, did it? She should have guarded against that."

"A year," said Hap. "One year."

But the sword stirred restlessly in his hand. "It will be a glorious year," said Hap, and he came forward.

The Warlock picked up a copper disc. "Four," he said, and the disc spun in midair.

By the time Hap had sloshed through the stream, the disc was a blur of motion. The Warlock moved to keep it between himself and Hap, and Hap dared not touch it, for it would have sheared through anything at all. He crossed around it, but again the Warlock had darted to the other side. In the pause he snatched up something else: a silvery knife, profusely inscribed.

"Whatever that is," said Hap, "it can't hurt me. No magic can affect me while I carry Glirendree."

"True enough," said the Warlock. "The disc will lose its force in a minute anyway. In the meantime, I know a secret that I would like to tell, one I could never tell to a friend."

Hap raised Glirendree above

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his head and, two-handed, swung it down on the disc. The sword stopped jarringly at the disc's rim.

"It's protecting you," said the Warlock. "If Glirendree hit the rim now, the recoil would knock you clear down to the village. Can't you hear the hum?"

Hap heard the whine as the disc cut the air. The tone was going up and up the scale.

"You're stalling," he said.

"That's true. So? Can it hurt you?"

"No. You were saying you knew a secret." Hap braced himself, sword raised, on one side of the disc, which now glowed red at the edge.

"I've wanted to tell someone for such a long time. A hundred and fifty years. Even Sharla doesn't know." The Warlock still stood ready to run if the swordsman should come after him. "I'd learned a little magic in those days, not much compared to what I know now, but big, showy stuff. Castles floating in the air. Dragons with golden scales. Armies turned to stone, or wiped out by lightning, instead of simple death spells. Stuff like that takes a lot of power, you know?"

"I've heard of such things."

"I did it all the time, for myself, for friends, for whoever happened to be king, or whomever I happened to be in love with. And I found that after I'd been settled for a while, the power would leave me. I'd have to move elsewhere to get it back."

The copper disc glowed bright orange with the heat of its spin. It should have fragmented, or melted, long ago.

"Then there are the dead places, the places where a warlock dares not go. Places where magic doesn't work. They tend to be rural areas, farmlands and sheep ranges, but you can find the old cities, the castles built to float which now lie tilted on their sides, the unnaturally aged bones of dragons, like huge lizards from another age.

"So I started wondering."

Hap stepped back a bit from the heat of the disc. It glowed pure white now, and it was like a sun brought to earth. Through the glare Hap had lost sight of the Warlock.

"So I built a disc like this one and set it spinning. Just a simple kinetic sorcery, but with a constant acceleration and no limit point. You know what mana is?"

"What's happening to your voice?"

"Mana is the name we give to the power behind magic." The Warlock's voice had gone weak and high.

A horrible suspicion came to Hap. The Warlock had slipped down the hill, leaving his voice behind! Hap trotted around the disc, shading his eyes from its heat.

An old man sat on the other

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side of the disc. His arthritic fingers, half-crippled with swollen joints, played with a rune-inscribed knife. "What I found out—oh, there you are. Well, it's too late now."

Hap raised his sword, and his sword changed.

It was a massive red demon, horned and hooved, and its teeth were in Hap's right hand. It paused, deliberately, for the few seconds it took Hap to realize what had happened and to try to jerk away. Then it bit down, and the swordsman's hand was off at the wrist.

The demon reached out, slowly enough, but Hap in his surprise was unable to move. He felt the taloned fingers close his windpipe.

He felt the strength leak out of the taloned hand, and he saw surprise and dismay spread across the demon's face.

The disc exploded. All at once and nothing first, it disintegrated into a flat cloud of metallic particles and was gone, flashing away as so much meteorite dust. The light was as lightning striking at one's feet. The sound was its thunder. The smell was vaporized copper.

The demon faded, as a chameleon fades against its background. Fading, the demon slumped to the ground in slow motion, and faded further, and was gone. When Hap reached out with his foot, he touched only dirt.

Behind Hap was a trench of burnt earth.

The spring had stopped. The rocky bottom of the stream was drying in the sun.

The Warlock's cavern had collapsed. The furnishings of the Warlock's mansion had gone crashing down into that vast pit, but the mansion itself was gone without trace.

Hap clutched his messily severed wrist, and he said, "But what happened?"

"Mana," the Warlock mumbled. He spat out a complete set of blackened teeth. "Mana. What I discovered was that the power behind magic is a natural resource, like the fertility of the soil. When you use it up, it's gone."

"But—"

"Can you see why I kept it a secret? One day all the wide world's mana will be used up. No more mana, no more magic. Do you know that Atlantis is tectonically unstable? Succeeding sorcerer-kings renew the spells each generation to keep the whole continent from sliding into the sea. What happens when the spells don't work any more? They couldn't possibly evacuate the whole continent in time. Kinder not to let them know."

"But . . . that disc."

The Warlock grinned with his empty mouth and ran his hands through snowy hair. All the hair came off in his fingers, leaving his

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scalp bare and mottled. "Senility is like being drunk. The disc? I told you. A kinetic sorcery with no upper limit. The disc keeps accelerating until all the mana in the locality has been used up."

Hap moved a step forward. Shock had drained half his strength. His foot came down jarringly, as if all the spring were out of his muscles.

"You tried to kill me."

The Warlock nodded. "I figured if the disc didn't explode and kill you while you were trying to go around it, Glirendree would strangle you when the constraint wore off. What are you complaining about? It cost you a hand, but you're free of Glirendree."

Hap took another step, and another. His hand was beginning to hurt, and the pain gave him strength. "Old man," he said thickly. "Two hundred years old. I can break your neck with the hand you left me. And I will."

The Warlock raised the inscribed knife.

"That won't work. No more magic." Hap slapped the Warlock's hand away and took the Warlock by his bony throat.

The Warlock's hand brushed easily aside, and came back, and up. Hap wrapped his arms around his belly and backed away with his eyes and mouth wide open. He sat down hard.

"A knife always works," said the Warlock.

"Oh," said Hap.

"I worked the metal myself, with ordinary blacksmith's tools, so the knife wouldn't crumble when the magic was gone. The runes aren't magic. They only say—"

"Oh," said Hap. "Oh." He toppled sideways.

The Warlock lowered himself onto his back. He held the knife up and read the markings, in a language only the Brotherhood remembered.

AND THIS, TOO, SHALL PASS AWAY. It was a very old platitude, even then.

He dropped his arm back and lay looking at the sky.

Presently the blue was blotted by a shadow.

"I told you to get out of here," he whispered.

"You should have known better. What's *happened* to you?"

"No more youth spells. I knew I'd have to do it when the prognostics spell showed blank." He drew a ragged breath. "It was worth it. I killed Glirendree."

"Playing hero, at your age! What can I do? How can I help?"

"Get me down the hill before my heart stops. I never told you my true age—"

"I knew. The whole village knows." She pulled him to sitting position, pulled one of his arms around her neck. It felt dead. She shuddered, but she wrapped her own arm around his waist and gathered herself for the effort.

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"You're so thin! Come on, love. We're going to stand up." She took most of his weight onto her, and they stood up.

"Go slow. I can hear my heart trying to take off."

"How far do we have to go?"

"Just to the foot of the hill, I think. Then the spells will work again, and we can rest." He stumbled. "I'm going blind," he said.

"It's a smooth path, and all downhill."

"That's why I picked this place. I knew I'd have to use the disc someday. You can't throw away knowledge. Always the time comes when you use it, because you have to, because it's there."

"You've changed so. So—so ugly. And you smell."

The pulse fluttered in his neck, like a hummingbird's wings. "Maybe you won't want me, after seeing me like this."

"You can change back, can't you?"

"Sure. I can change to anything you like. What color eyes do you want?"

"I'll be like this myself someday," she said. Her voice held cool horror. And it was fading; he was going deaf.

"I'll teach you the proper spells, when you're ready. They're dangerous. Blackly dangerous."

She was silent for a time. Then: "What color were *his* eyes? You know, Belhap Sattlestone whatever."

"Forget it," said the Warlock, with a touch of pique.

And suddenly his sight was back.

But not forever, thought the Warlock as they stumbled through the sudden daylight. When the mana runs out, I'll go like a blown candle flame, and civilization will follow. No more magic, no more magic-based industries. Then the whole world will be barbarian until men learn a new way to coerce nature, and the swordsmen, the damned stupid swordsmen will win after all.

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William Lee's last story here (SEA HOME, June 1968) took us deep under the sea; this latest moves into deep space, to a troubled planet where the natives are hit by a baffling wave of suicides and the colonists are on the edge of panic. It all adds up to a totally engrossing tale of science-fictional detection.

TROUBLE ON KORT

by William M. Lee

JAN PIERSON WOKE FROM UNeasy sleep and opened his eyes to the uninspiring view of the metal ceiling of his cabin. The familiar surges of nausea were beginning, and he knew they would go on for the next two hours, not to be relieved in the least by the normal expedient of vomiting. There wasn't one damn thing to do but take it until it was time for his next quell capsule.

It was a miserable situation. His physical discomfort was compounded by self-scorn. He despised the weakness which subjected him time after time to space-jump nausea when most people conquered it after a few bouts. There was a pretty girl aboard, a teen-ager, who had forced herself to stay in the lounge after her first capsule had worn off. She had sat there weak and sick but determined to hang on, and she had had no medication since. What a weakling he must appear to be.

From Idris to Kort was a bit over seven light-years, which meant roughly ten and a half days in warp drive. Three of those days had passed. OK, he'd live through the others. He'd done it often enough in the past. Clamping his teeth, he slid out of the bunk, rested a minute on his knees on the floor, then forced himself up and groped his way to the single small chair which the room had.

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The entire cabin was no more than six feet by eight and provided, in addition to the bunk and chair, one very small dresser with a mirror. Jan took a quick look at himself and found the image depressing. He didn't much like his face at the best of times. It was too long and narrow, with high cheekbones, not at all a typical Idrian face, more, in fact, like some you saw on Earth. He was just under six feet and lanky, and at the moment he was looking like a space-sick scarecrow.

The minute cabin was what you came to expect on twelve-passenger freighters, and Jan had rarely had an opportunity to travel any other way. The planets he visited were not those likely to be served by liners. The main lounge itself was a box of a room which would have been seriously overcrowded if all the passengers had assembled simultaneously, but it boasted several comfortable chairs, a game table and a micro-scanner.

It was the scanner which had induced Pierson to leave his bunk. There was a formidable amount of study ahead of him before he reached Kort, and not a minute must be wasted of those hours when he would feel tolerably well. Swallowing in a vain effort to control his nausea and fighting dizziness, he maneuvered himself into a dressing gown and made his way to the shower room, happily unoccupied. He put depilatory on his face, then took a cold needle shower and began to feel that he was living again, if not enjoying it.

A few minutes later he entered the lounge and gave a curt good day to its only occupant, a Dr. Carmody, one of his damnable fellow passengers who didn't feel ill and was constrained to tell you so. Carmody would willingly have conversed and moved to put his book aside, but Jan went straight to the scanner and busied himself threading the tape. He had given himself a shot of metrazole as an aid to learning and, nauseated or not, would be able to make the hour count until he could take another capsule and begin to work at top efficiency.

The trouble with human accomplishments, he reflected, was that they substituted one problem for another. According to the physicists, warp travel should be instantaneous, but in a practical sense it was far from it. They still had to flicker back and forth between real and hyperspace, and it was the transitions, a thousand or so a second, which consumed the time and most of the energy and made you beastly sick. Or consider quell. It fixed you up fine but you could take only so much, based on your body weight. Nuts. He'd better get to work. He pressed the key and a page of the Kortan dictionary flashed on the screen.

Kortan grammar was easy. It was as systematic as ancient Greek,

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and with only two irregular verbs, "to be" and "to have". Vocabulary wasn't too bad either. Five thousand or so words would see him through, since he'd be making no pretense of being other than an Interworlder. Comprehension of the spoken language would be something else again. The accent was difficult. Furthermore, both the dictionary and the spoken tapes were thirty years old. To catch shades of meaning, implications of deviousness, displeasure, offended pride or the like, would as usual be problematical.

After a time somebody else came into the lounge, and, even boxed in by the sound shields of the scanner, he could hear voices. He was tapped on the shoulder.

"Mr. Pierson." It was the teenager, Marty Stevens. He turned reluctantly.

"Hi, Marty."

"Hi. Listen, you can't work all the time. How about a three-handed game of binnies?"

He looked at his watch. "I wouldn't be any good until my next pill, but it's almost time. I'll work for ten minutes, then I'll play for an hour. No more."

He returned to the dictionary. "Kribok—a stone. Kriboki—a small stone. Kribuk—two stones. Kribook—more than two stones. Kribog—a pebble. Kriboch—sand. Kribookab—a stone building or edifice." It wasn't a bad language at all.

He finished his self-imposed ten minutes at the scanner, then stood up and fished for his capsules. Marty, God bless her, had gone to the galley and brought back a bulb of hot coffee. During their alternate microseconds in real space, they maintained a tenth of a gravity, which didn't suffice to keep liquids in cups. Jan moved to a chair at the card table and sat with his eyes closed, prepared to enjoy the sensation of diminishing pangs from his outraged stomach.

"Is what you're reading classified?" Marty asked.

"Nope. Take a look."

She bent over the viewer, then came back to the table. "Treben dok so klenen gli u treben," she told him.

"My God, you speak Kortan."

"Yes, of course. I was born there."

"But you never told me."

"You never asked me. As a matter of fact, you've never asked me anything or told me anything. You've kept your head in your shell like a snapping turtle."

Dr. Carmody started to laugh but changed it into a cough.

"What's a snapping turtle?" Jan asked.

"Never been to Earth?" Carmody demanded.

"Once or twice. Briefly."

"Rather ill-tempered reptile. Shell like an Idrian perret. Bites. Makes good soup, though. What was that gibberish, Marty?"

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"That was a Kortan proverb. 'Work hard but remember why you're working.' "

Jan Pierson realized suddenly that he was feeling wonderful, was ravenously hungry and could look forward to this beatific state for the next twelve hours. He grinned.

"See, he can so smile," Marty told Dr. Carmody.

"Better have a sandwich," Carmody said. He pressed a bell beside the table, and in a minute a little man whom Jan had not seen before came in. Like nearly all of the oxygen-breathing races, he was humanoid, but of an unfamiliar type, about four feet tall and extremely thin by Idrian or Terran standards, with an oversized skull and enormous dark eyes.

"Think you can fix me up a sandwich?" Jan asked. "A big one and another coffee."

"S-s-s," said the little man pleasantly, and disappeared.

Dr. Carmody left off shuffling and began to deal. The metallized cards hit the magnetic table top with little clicks.

"You're a forbidding person," Marty said. "Do you make a point of it?"

"Forbidding?" Jan repeated. He was quite aware that by nature he was reserved, cautious in his judgments of people and slow to make friends. Often enough his job required him to play a different role. Between times he probably seemed a bit detached. But this very pretty girl had just called him forbidding; a pretty girl, what's more, who spoke Kortan with a good accent.

"No, I don't try to be. Between warp sickness and trying to learn a language in ten days, there hasn't been much time."

"You're Peace Corps, aren't you?" she asked. "Or aren't you allowed to say?"

"Yes, of course. It isn't confidential, but you don't go out of your way to advertise it. How did you know?"

"By elimination. You're not big business or sales or the rugged adventurer type, and you're not a dedicated scientist out to reclassify the bird life of Kort. You're distinctly not military. So you must be Peace Corps. Besides, I asked the First Officer who you were."

Dr. Carmody put down his hand unlooked at. "Tell us."

"Tell you what?"

"The Peace Corps. Heard of them for years. Still don't know what they do, or how."

"Oh. We keep the peace, or try to. We settle local squabbles by any means available."

"Don't go out and teach the natives to make better mud huts?"

"That was a different Peace Corps, quite a lot of years back. We're just a bunch of free-wheeling diplomats with no authority. Marty, will you talk Kortan with me?"

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"For those hours of the day when you don't go around looking faintly green, yes."

"You said you were born on Kort."

"Yes." She stopped and bit her lip. "I've spent two years on Idris and two on Terra with a cousin of my father's. I finished college there."

He was surprised. Marty must have a few more years than she looked. "Your parents live in the Colony?"

"They did. My mother died years ago, and father last month. I got the news . . . very recently. Now the estate . . . a lawyer says it must be settled. I think I'd rather play binnies later." She got up and walked quickly from the lounge.

"Damn," said Dr. Carmody. "Thought she didn't have a care in the world."

Jan nodded. "Yes. She seems to have guts, though."

"Going to Kort on a job?"

"Yes. I don't know if you've heard about the disappearances."

"Heard of them."

"Funny situation. Fourteen people missing, all from the Interworld Colony, all pretty recent. Relations between the Kortans and the Colony have always seemed to be good, but you can't tell. People are beginning to panic. A few more show up missing and there'll be a flood of applications for transfer to other planets. After that a general exodus is most likely."

"Peace Corps part of Interworld Police?"

"Definitely not. We try to make police actions unnecessary."

"What can you do in this case?"

"I have no idea. It may not be my business at all."

"You might be interested," Carmody said, "in why I'm going to Kort. I'm IHO. Interworld Health Organization. Supposed to be a suicide expert. Anyway, studied suicides for twenty years. Kort's having an epidemic of them. All native Kortans. None in the Colony."

"Curious," Jan said. "Disappearances in the Colony and none outside. Suicides among the Kortans and none in the Colony, at least that I've heard of. What do you call an epidemic. I mean, how many?"

"A dozen. Not a large number, but significant. Until the last few months there'd never been a recorded Kortan suicide. Queer. And no failures. Queerer."

"What do you mean?"

"You expect abortive suicides. People want to call attention to themselves or their troubles, but don't really want to die. The Kortans have all succeeded. If the Kortans go in for proverbs, I want to ask Marty if they have any bearing on death."

Jan pondered. "We must keep our eyes open for a connection. Well, back to work."

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The Starship Havlom came into real space within ten thousand miles of her target point. That was one of the advantages of flicker, an important one. A navigator always knew where he was. They orbited Kort three times to reduce real-space velocity, then went onto repulsors and descended slowly.

Bright lights went on in the corridors. Crew members, who hadn't been seen on the passenger deck before, hurried on unexplained errands. The three who were disembarking stacked their cabin baggage close to the exit port and went to the lounge to sign a variety of documents. Those going on wandered restlessly, said good-byes and presently returned to their cabins. There was nothing to see. The ship touched. The gang-port made half a turn and lifted outward. A hundred-foot long ramp was jockeyed into place, and a crewman told the passengers to watch their step. This was Kort.

To Pierson's eye the spaceport looked just like every other spaceport; a square mile or so of uninterrupted concrete punctuated only by painted markers. Where the concrete ended in woven wire fencing there were rows of warehouses and equally unbeautiful smaller buildings which housed the operations of receiving and dispatching. Freight haulers were trundling toward the Havlom. A miniature bus drew up near the foot of the ramp to gather in the passengers.

He followed Marty Stevens down the long incline, admiring her trim figure, her sure-footedness, her apparent self-possession. For most of the last week of the trip she had been a cheerful companion and a competent teacher. His Kortan accent was immeasurably improved, and he had some knowledge of catch phrases.

Carmody said good-bye as Jan climbed out of the car at the embassy, and Marty said "kotobuon," which implied that she would be glad to see him again.

A group of three Kortans was approaching Jan as he walked toward the embassy entrance, and he watched them with an expression of blank preoccupation, while in fact he was cataloguing all the details he could. They were young men, or young in appearance, all six feet or a little taller, inordinately broad of shoulder, short waisted and long legged. Body differences were not great, but on Earth or Idris their clothes would have had to be made to order. Looking at a single male Kortan, one might think he was a somewhat unusual specimen of pure Terran lineage. Considered in a group, their common characteristics stood out.

Their skins were swarthy, as one would expect from the brilliance of the sun, and heavy eyebrows drew a line across their

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faces, protecting their dark, rather deep-set eyes from the glare. Their black hair was woven into two long plaits. They looked intelligent and alert.

Certainly more alert than the Interworld Ambassador, who was a tired, gray man. His features, sharp and distinguished, suited the role of ambassadorship, and his manners and speech were the impeccable norm. He was the seventh ambassador Jan Pierson had had occasion to meet. His name was Wendell Holt. He had been born on Earth and he was close to retirement. Jan wondered if he would live to make it home.

"We've made no mistakes," Holt said. "To the best of my knowledge, no mistakes. The Colony is sixty-five years old and was established peaceably. Our first colonists were welcomed. The Kortans were well advanced. They worked metals. They had coal-fired steam engines and used them to drive ships. They knew a little astronomy, enough to understand the difference between planets and stars. They accepted the idea of spaceships without shock. So." He spread his thin, papery hands in a habitual, meaningless gesture.

"They had almost no knowledge of medicine, and here we were able to help them promptly, quite promptly. A few of our remedies worked well for them, aspirin, quinine, and so on. Later we were able to develop some antibiotics against their more pathogenic bacteria. Now they've taken over their own medical research. They have their own colleges and engineering schools. The teachers we have provided are being replaced by Kortans. Standing on their own feet. Good, very good. But now this."

Holt appeared to look at Jan Pierson for the first time.

"How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

Jan controlled his impulse to smile because the question was so predictable. He knew that he looked young and that his slight frame and reticent manner gave little assurance of competence.

"Thirty-one, sir, in Earth years, thirty-two on Idris and about thirty-eight on Kort."

Holt rapped his knuckles irritably. "Rather young to have been sent on a planetary mission. Your first job?"

"No sir. I handled the recent problems on Tamor and Phoenix."

"You don't say. I know about the Phoenix thing. That was quite different, though. Did you ever deal with systematic kidnapping?"

"No, I haven't. You're convinced it is that?"

"Only by inference. I trust that it isn't systematic murder. You saw my cable?"

"Yes."

"It said that fourteen people had disappeared within a period of six weeks. The number is now sixteen."

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"I see. You have data, I suppose, on the missing people: names, ages, occupations, family status, financial standings, all the rest of it."

Ambassador Holt was not, however, ready to get down to cases. "Sixty-five years," he repeated. "Two thousand people in the Colony, and sixty-five years of peaceable cooperation. We've made no mistakes, no serious ones, that is. We've been benevolent, with no strings attached. Of course it's been a two-way street, mutually profitable. The Kortans have given us wide mining concessions for uranium and thorium. They knew the value of what they were giving. We made sure that they did. We got needed heavy metals. They got an advanced civilization."

"Are they happy with it?"

"Of course they are. The Kortans were reasonably well advanced when we came, but their rate of progress was slow, partly no doubt because so many of their most able men were more interested in the arts than the sciences. We provided the stimulus and they have accelerated amazingly. They've saved thousands of years. I predict that Kort will have interplanetary travel in five years and the space warp in twenty-five, and these developments will be their own, not handed to them on a platter."

"And the artistic segment?" Jan asked. "Mightn't they be yearning for the good old days?"

Holt shook his head. "No. No evidence of it. Please don't try to draw analogies from ancient history. Interworld has too much experience in colonizing to remain unaware of dissident minorities."

"Your comments on Kortan-Colony relations suggest that you do believe it's an interracial problem, that Kortans are doing the kidnapping. How sure are you?"

"Not sure at all, confound it. It's the easiest explanation. Why should sixteen people of all breeds and stamps take it into their heads to sneak off with no signs of any preliminary preparation? Very well. Here in this folder are the dossiers on the missing persons. What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm not sure. First look for a common denominator, I suppose."

"Um. I wish you luck. Let me know what else you need."

"I will. Earlier you said that if mistakes had been made, they were trivial. You had something in mind?"

Holt stared at Jan speculatively. "Yes, I guess I did. You'll want a map of the Colony."

"I will, of course. Probably the police have one, showing all the pertinent locations."

"You're going to talk to the police?"

"It seems an obvious first step. Why not?"

Holt rubbed his eyes. He looked weary. "We have only three police

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in the Colony. They're all Kortans. In view of my suspicions . . . anyway, they've been no help. That seems odd, with sixteen cases to work on."

He touched a button and a girl came in from the outer office. "This is Mr. Pierson, Miss Takani. My secretary. Please give Mr. Pierson any help he asks for. You know why he is here. At the moment will you please get him a copy of our atlas, and the large-scale maps of the Colony and the City."

Jan had risen but got no more than a businesslike nod from Miss Takani.

"What do you think of her?" Holt asked, after the door had closed. "Attractive?"

"Yes, very, if you're partial to Amazon women. Rather well endowed."

The ambassador nodded. "Exactly, and quite typical. With men the legs, arms and torso appear disproportionate. With women . . . um. Genetically, the species is very different. Unlike your world and mine, there could never be interbreeding. In terms of bodily structure, well, it's quite possible, if I make myself clear. There, perhaps, lies one of our few mistakes."

"Do you mean that Kortan women have been raped, or merely seduced?"

"Neither. It appears they seduce the Interworlders. They are extraordinarily passionate, so I've been told."

"I see. And this has been a cause of resentment by the Kortan men?"

"There's never been any indication of resentment. Oddly enough, the Kortan men seem to find it funny. Still—"

Jan thought that he had heard of societies which displayed no sexual possessiveness, but he wasn't sure. He riffled through the folder of papers. A name jumped out at him—Ilyoh Stevens.

"Stevens," Jan said. "Did he or does he have a daughter?"

"No, Ilyoh Stevens had no family. You may be thinking of Roger Stevens. No relation. Rod was a teacher at the university until his death a couple of months ago. His daughter, a pretty child as I recall, is living on Earth. Why?"

"She isn't on Earth. She came out on the ship with me. She said her father had died recently."

"Yes. He fell from the top floor window of one of the university buildings. Brilliant man, very tragic. What did she come back here for? She'll be completely alone."

"To consult with a lawyer on settling the estate."

"Um. I knew Rod Stevens moderately well. There isn't any estate, or none to speak of. It wasn't a highly paid job, and it was expensive to send young Marty back to Earth to college. No, she won't

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have much. These lawyers don't use sense."

Jan levered himself out of the too deep chair. "I'll get along to the hotel. I may want to talk to you tomorrow."

Miss Takani was waiting with the maps and a key. "You're already checked in at the hotel. Your bags will be in your room—401. It's on the top floor. I got you a nice one in case you should want to entertain there."

She swept him with a sidelong look that left him in no doubt at all that she personally would be available to be entertained in his room, and she walked with him to the embassy lobby, matching his stride. At the door she handed him her card. Ota Takani, it read, with a scribbled telephone number, and it carried with it the scent of her musky perfume.

The Hotel Vil-Kort was close to the embassy. It was small and seemed nearly deserted, but a few people, Kortans and Interworlders, were beginning to come into its dining room.

In his room he cleaned up, then reclosed and locked his bags and went down for lunch. His wiry frame had lost a few pounds to the rigors of warp sickness, and he could expect to be hungry for days. The dining room offered two menus. One was for Interworlders, the sort of hotel food you found on every planet. The other listed Kortan foods. Jan cautiously sampled some native hors d'oeuvres, then retreated to an oldfashioned stew of vedder and potatoes.

Afterward, with a map of the Colony taped to a wall of his bedroom, he pinpointed the geography of the situation. It was not informative. With blue pins marking the homes and places of business of the missing people and with red ones showing the locations where they had last been seen, the map was a complete scatter pattern. He began to write a list of generalizations:

1. No racial bias. MPs from four worlds—Idris, Earth, Droon and Donelay.

2. No age bias. Average age 38. Average in Colony 40.

3. No sex bias. 10 men, 6 women. About the same as the Colony average.

4. No relationship to occupations.

5. No relationship to names.

6. Relationship to wealth. More info needed.

7. Relationship to attitudes, prejudices. No data.

8. Times of disappearances. All at night.

It was a useless list, and his attempt to play detective was damned foolishness. He called police headquarters and found that the chief, whose title wasn't chief but commissioner (a commissioner with two subordinates!), answered his own phone.

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"I was hoping you'd call," Commissioner Brunig said, sounding cordial. "May I come to see you at your hotel? Say about twenty minutes?"

Jan said he would be pleased, then went out on the miniature balcony of his room and stood staring out at the city, trying to identify landmarks. There were few buildings of more than two stories—the hotel and a scattering of office buildings. The Colony and the Kortan city of Ligord which it adjoined were architecturally very much of a pattern. Construction was entirely of stone or tinted concrete blocks ranging in shade from cream to tan. Beyond the limits of Ligord he could see a line of wooded hills. The hot, white sun had turned dusky along its lower edge and was dipping behind them. He watched the gathering twilight until Commissioner Brunig's knock.

The policeman was a little taller than the Kortan norm, about six three with shoulders to match. He seemed genuinely glad to be meeting Pierson, who remained mindful, however, of Ambassador Holt's misgivings and was prepared to watch for any false note. Was it not a false note for him to display such cooperativeness in the first place?

The map caught Brunig's attention, and he stood examining it, nodding slowly as he checked the positions of the pins. "I have a duplicate, more or less, in my office," he said. "It hasn't told me anything. I telephoned the ambassador earlier, to see if we couldn't get together. He said you were looking for a common denominator. Same with us, but nothing has appeared." He spoke nearly perfect English, distorted a little by the clicks and gutturals which came naturally from the Kortan throat. Jan was as much at home in English as in Idrian and decided to leave well enough alone. However much improved, his Kortan would still be a poorer channel to understanding.

Brunig seated himself in one of the armchairs and immediately looked like a much shorter man. "Let me say something to start," Brunig said. "Mr. Holt has become more and more reluctant to discuss this situation with us, obviously because he fears a Kortan conspiracy and is not certain that we are doing our best. There is assuredly no evidence that we have accomplished anything. He may even think that the Colony police are involved. We are neither involved nor lying down on the job. You may wish to accept that tentatively. As you will. But we have no leads, no useful witnesses. We do not know what precautions to take.

"Residents of the Colony are becoming frightened, as they should. If you'll look out the window, you will see that the street, busy only a few minutes ago, is nearly de-

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serted. People are not going out after dark, except on urgent business. But that has been true for some time, and the disappearances go on. If you don't care who your victim is, you can always find somebody."

Jan had seated himself facing Brunig squarely and had been searching his face for any expression which might be revealing. He learned nothing. The dark eyes were nearly hidden by bushy brows. The face as a whole was unreadable by someone of a different race. In the meantime, Brunig's candor was disarming.

"So you also believe that these are kidnappings," Jan said.

"I sincerely hope they are not wholesale killings. What else is there to believe?"

"And that Kortans are responsible?"

Brunig shrugged. "I suppose so, but in my experience nothing is more out of keeping with the Kortan character. How much do you know about Kort?"

"Not much. Before we get into that, can you have dinner with me?"

Brunig looked pleased, if that was the proper interpretation of a wide smile which turned the corners of his mouth down instead of up. "Thank you. I must call my office to say that I will not be back. I wonder if you appreciate something. Sixty years ago, Kort was in the age of the two-wheeled chariot drawn by—by the equivalent of the Terran horse. Now I can dial and converse with anyone on the planet, and go home tonight by air taxi, if I wish. Now why would any Kortan wish to scare off the goose that lays such estimable eggs? Any Kortan in his right mind."

"Oho! And how about Kortans not in their right minds?"

"We have no insanity. There are rare cases of retardation, but these are regretfully disposed of in infancy."

Jan said, "Let's have dinner up here where we can talk more freely." He was beginning to like this urbane fellow who seemed to have more competence than you would expect from a small-town policeman, and to trust him in spite of Ambassador Holt.

"Where'd you learn your English?" Jan asked, when dinner had been served and the waiter had left.

"I spent a year at police school in a city called New York. Since then our local problems have all seemed easy, at least until this one. No, I find it hard to imagine Kortan kidnappings, mostly because until now I never encountered one. Your Kortan is not a particularly law-abiding citizen, but his crimes and misdemeanors are spur-of-the-moment things. He commits thefts when he sees something he badly wants and thinks he has a chance to grab it and run,

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but he does not rob banks because that would require long planning. He gets into fights and may kill his opponent, but he does not poison his business partner to collect an insurance policy.

"You know, I presume, that we have only about three million planetary population. We have one nation and have been one nation since the days of isolated villages. We have a single police force, set at three per ten thousand people. Here in the Colony we have three for two thousand, because more services are wanted."

"You have about three hundred police, then, for the entire planet. Remarkable. Who runs the show?"

"More than any other single individual, I suppose I do."

"Well! I had you tagged wrong."

"Not so wrong. I'm really a small-town cop, if you know that word. In any case, I'm glad to cede this outrageous mess to the Peace Corps."

"Whoa, you can't cede your responsibility like that. The Peace Corps doesn't qualify as a detective agency. Our usual sort of job is to meet with a bunch of people who can't agree on something and persuade them to agree, by chicanery if necessary. I don't know how we got pulled in on this one. You say that Kortans may kill one another in a fight. Is there never killing for a cause?"

"Well, we have a good deal of thievery, and our sense of possession is strong. If a man has worked ten years to possess a painting or a small statue, it is not surprising if he defends his property with violence. He may not want to kill a thief, but he'll do so if need be."

"Do I take it that Kortans are often art collectors?"

"Very often. We like to put our surplus earnings into art originals. On the other hand, we have no music. To us, outworld music is noise, and not particularly pleasant noise at that."

"I see. At the moment, Kortans appear to me to be a curious race. How do you work off your repressions?"

"Sports. One of our favorites is bagata. Put a score of men in an arena, naked except for boxing gloves. The last man standing is the winner."

"Wow!" said Jan.

"Precisely."

"Mind if I take up a somewhat delicate subject?"

Brunig smiled. "Sex?"

"Yes."

"You'd like to know whether Kortans resent frequent liaison between their women and the Interworlders, and whether this could be a motive for . . . well, call it murder. I assure you it is not. We practice monogamy in marriage, but not fidelity. To us fidelity seems artificial and uncomfortable, and sexual jealousy is hard to imagine. I am now a widower, but during her life my wife had, I sup-

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pose, a dozen affairs a year. I may have had almost as many, although women are generally more interested in sex. You seem taken aback, but it has been perfectly normal to our race down through evolutionary ages. The Kortan female, you see, conceives only when she wishes to do so, a matter, we have recently learned, of a mentally triggered hormonal readjustment. So she bears children only to her spouse and only when the economic situation is favorable. Kortan women find some Interworlders most attractive. Conversely, Interworld females are not in the least interesting to Kortan men. It is an amusing thing."

"Yes," Jan said without conviction, and switched away from what he still felt must be an uneasy topic. "I know the major racial components of the Colony. Tell me about the minorities."

"A little of everything. We have small groups of individuals from nineteen out of the thirty-two trading-bloc planets. Beyond that, we have two men from Skald."

"What are they doing here? If a planet isn't in the bloc, its people shouldn't be on interstellar ships."

"True. A tramp freighter under the Idrian flag had a fire in the cargo, and two men were killed. Illegally, they dropped down on Skald and recruited two hands. Much good it must have done them. You could not imagine two more sorry specimens. They visit me frequently to beg to be returned to Skald, a matter on which I can do absolutely nothing."

"Why are they sorry specimens? I know nothing about Skald. It's enough of a problem to try to learn something about the places where you're likely to be assigned. There's something fishy, isn't there?"

"Fishy perhaps. The Skaldeans themselves are so unattractive they would naturally be avoided. Their skins are gray and sticky looking. They coax and whine and apologize for existing, and they have an unpleasant odor. They move slowly, and I imagine their responses to stimuli are sluggish. Both men are artists of a sort, but lack any creativity. Their works are limited to portrait busts in colored plastics, and these are exact reproductions of the subject, too exact to be interesting. Photography offers more latitude. They haven't enough ambition or stamina to hold regular jobs, let alone promote a conspiracy. Forget them."

"Very well, next question. How much interpenetration is there between Ligord and the Colony?"

"Let me see. There are about five hundred Kortans working in the Colony, and a fourth of them also sleep here, although they may have permanent homes in Ligord. A handful of Interworlders, all from Droon and all artists, live on a single street in Old Ligord where

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they have studios and shops to sell their paintings. A score or so of Colonists, mostly teachers, work and live near the university. That is about it. Before the recent events, Colony people circulated freely in Ligord. There are popular restaurants, for example."

"It all sounds very natural," said Jan. "Tell me about the actions you've been taking. Have you had organized searches?"

"As organized as could be," Brunig said. "I've borrowed men from other districts, and we have patrolled the tunnels in a series of pincer movements. On Kort it is, of course, nearly a hopeless job."

"Tunnels?" Jan inquired.

"You don't know about them? Do you know about our sun?"

"What about it?"

"It is brighter than Idris's sun, as you will have noticed, and not so well behaved. We have solar storms, sometimes as often as two times in a year, a bad one every three or four years. Kortan animals and birds have caves they retreat into. Man gave up his caves and began to build tunnels many centuries ago. With the discovery of concrete and ceramics, they became permanent structures. Now we have the tunnels and privately owned or communal cellars where we retreat in a sunstorm. We can go upstairs on short errands, but we avoid windows and we do not go outside at all. The sun is ruinous to the eyes and will fry your skin off in a few minutes exposure.

"You can imagine the tunnel network, generally four levels and coextensive with the city and the Colony. We are prohibited by law from sealing off any part of it. The storms come without warning, and the tunnels may be needed within minutes. Add to this that a private owner is allowed to close off short, non-communicating tunnels and basement chambers as he would his home. So our search has not been very effective." Brunig rose and stretched. "How may we help?"

"Tomorrow," Jan said, "I'd like to talk to the closest friend or associate of each of the people on the list. In their homes or offices, preferably. Maybe you can suggest names, arrange some sort of a schedule and, if you think it would help, put an official blessing on my visits. I'll need to talk again to Wendell Holt, and I'd like to have you there for that. If there should be time for it tomorrow, I'll want to take a walk in Ligord, alone I think, just to look at people going about their daily affairs."

"Very good. I will be in my office at 0800. Can you come there?" He stabbed a finger at the map. "Two blocks."

Jan went down with him to the empty lobby, stood at the curb until he was out of sight, then, having had no exercise for many days, ran up the four flights of stairs.

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Propped up in the middle of his wide bed and wearing a welcoming smile in lieu of anything more substantial, was Miss Ota Takani.

Jan took the sketchiest of notes during his interviews. He was hoping for nothing so concrete as timetables or undisclosed facts; rather for impressions, hints as to the characters of the victims which might account for their selection. Three of those he talked to were Kortans, and by chance one of them proved to have known Professor Stevens. Jan asked questions. You couldn't classify Stevens' death with the disappearances, but it was, he thought, a sufficient rarity for a stable citizen to fall from a lofty window to warrant getting what facts he could.

Because he wanted to keep them unofficial in tone, some of the conversations were long, and he did not complete his list. It was late afternoon before he and Brunig called at the embassy.

Ota greeted Commissioner Brunig formally but accorded Jan an obvious wink. "Will you be busy tonight?" she asked.

Jan glanced at the policeman, who was wearing a turned-down grin. "So you've been embracing our customs. Good. The sooner you get to know us the better."

Holt was sitting at his desk as if he had not moved since yesterday, but he looked tireder, Jan thought, or sicker. His color was waxy. But he had prepared a short financial statement on each of the missing people. Toward Brunig he was reserved but professionally courteous.

Jan asked if Holt had any responsibilities for the Skaldeans.

"Yes and no." Holt spread his hands. "They shouldn't be here, but I have no fund I can tap to send them home. It would be costly since there are no scheduled stops. They should find jobs and save money until they can pay their own way. Unfortunately, they don't seem capable of any sustained effort. Why do you ask?"

"Because they're an unknown factor. Unknown to me, that is."

"I trust that you are not wasting your time and my budget on idle curiosities. They are incompetents and they assuredly have no connection with this affair."

Afterward, walking toward the hotel, Jan said to Brunig, "How did the Skaldeans come to be dropped off here. I shouldn't have thought it would be allowed."

"They deserted. Deserted and disappeared until the day after the tramp had taken off. The tramp, incidentally, recruited two young Kortans in their places, recently graduated engineers. I hope they come back to us one day. We can't afford to have our brains drained off to other planets. Not at this stage in our development."

"Could you arrange for me to see them?"

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"You really are hyped on those two poor Skaldeans. Yes, I guess I can. Do you care if I am not at your disposal this evening? There is a meeting of an organization of lawyers and policemen which I should really . . ."

"Of course. See you sometime tomorrow."

Jan began dinner at the Vil-Kort alone, rereading his scratchy notes and trying to see a pattern. Dr. Carmody stopped at his table.

"Stand some company?"

"Yes, sure."

Carmody sat down and considered the menu. "Getting anywhere on your disappearances?"

"Hardly begun. How are you coming on your suicides?"

"Not as far as that. Spent the day talking to a group of Kortan MDs and psychologists. By and large, Kortans are a pretty sane race. Still think there's a connection between our problems?"

"Not that strong," Jan said. "A possibility. Two unprecedented sets of events occurring at the same time invite speculation. Have you met the police commissioner?"

"No."

"He's an able man. Called on the ambassador?"

"I'm scheduled to see both of them tomorrow."

"You're an MD. I'd be curious to know what you think of Holt. To a layman's eye, he's a hell of a sick man."

"I'm not practicing and I couldn't properly do anything about it anyway."

"Couldn't you flag his own doctor if you thought he was in a bad way?"

"Maybe. We'll see. Initially I must assume he's under adequate medical care."

Jan presently took his leave. A note was waiting for him at the desk, telling him to call Brunig. He went to his room to call.

"There has been a new development," Brunig said. "Two of the missing people have been seen, one around noon today in Skarvik, which is a mining town about six hundred kilometers from here, and one in Ligord just an hour ago."

"OK," said Jan, "the picture is suddenly less ominous. What do they say?"

"They have both disappeared again, which is puzzling, but the identifications seem reliable enough. They were seen on the streets by people who knew them, and in both cases there were short conversations which confirmed the identities. I have men out looking for them naturally, but unless you see it differently, I think I will go ahead to my meeting. In the meantime it occurs to me that you do not have photographs of our subjects. I am sending you a set by messenger. Maybe you will run into one of them if they are starting to show up again."

"Many thanks," Jan said. "Go to your meeting."

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At the desk Jan laid out all the notes he had made during the day, mostly a word or two only to remind him of conversations. Somewhere among all the tag ends there was a hint which he was missing. But he was given no chance for thought. The telephone buzzed.

An unfamiliar feminine voice asked if he was Jan Pierson.

"And I am Vera Marrock . . . Mrs. Marrock. I live at 314 Norvei Avenue. The same street your hotel is on, but seven blocks away."

"Yes?"

"I live in the apartment just below the one that the Stevenses used to have. The police called and said you'd be coming to see me today."

"That's right, but it will have to be tomorrow."

"Marty is staying with me. She met you on the ship."

"Yes, of course. Is something wrong?"

"Not really, I guess. We were talking about all these kidnappings over dinner, and Marty suddenly got an idea she had to tell you, or thought she did. She jumped up from the table and said she was going to your hotel, and ran out. I called after her that she could phone you, but I guess she didn't hear me. We're not supposed to go out after dark, you know, and I'm a little worried for her. I'm an old woman and I don't get around too well or I'd go after her. Do you think there's any danger?"

"Certainly not, Mrs. Marrock," Jan said in a voice calculated to reassure old ladies, "but just to make you feel better, I'll walk up Norvei Avenue and meet her."

He rang off and thought about the situation which, in terms of statistics, was not alarming; but while he thought, he was putting on his coat and shoes, and he was out of the hotel in two minutes.

He passed no pedestrians between the Vil-Kort and 314 Norvei Avenue. There, at the risk of reducing the old lady to panic, he pushed the buzzer.

"Has she come back? In that case, you'd better call the police. Ask them to get in touch with Brunig, but to start a search without him. I'm going back to look again."

A two-hundred watt pencil torch was among the items of equipment which went with him constantly. He used it now, scouting up each alley and cul-de-sac, and he zigzagged back and forth across the avenue. For a community only sixty-five years old, the Colony had a surprising number of narrow byways, mostly ending in small courts giving access to a couple of dwellings and sometimes a shop. It was a prosperous area, but off the main thoroughfare there was no light, or only that which shone through windows. He made slow headway. Nothing could be gained by racing through the route and missing Marty or some telltale indication.

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In the second block he found her necklace, a fine gold chain which she had worn nearly constantly on shipboard. It lay in the middle of the sidewalk, but the dark entrance to a court was suggestively close by. He scooped up the chain, then thought better of it and replaced it, arranged roughly in the form of an arrow. In the distance he saw the lights of an aircar and thought it was cruising slowly, possibly the police. With the torch he blinked the immemorial and universal SOS, then plunged into the court. It was smaller than most, and although a wine store occupied one side, it and the residence opposite were unlighted.

His beam flickering around the empty area could be seen, if there was anybody to see, from a dozen dark windows, but the court had to be checked first. He mounted to the door of the residence and turned the knob gently. It was unlocked, which was fortunate. Jan had once taken a course in locks and combinations, and he carried a simple picklock with him, but he had never had occasion to use it and doubted that he would be very successful. The doorlocks which he had noticed during his two days on Kort had looked uniformly sturdy, perhaps as a result of the Kortans fondness for thievery. That this door should be standing unlocked in a darkened house implied an invitation to a trap, but he saw no alternative but to accept it.

He dropped to a crouch before pushing the door open. Nothing happened. He rose to his feet, slid into the opening and closed the door softly behind him. Motionless, he waited for his eyes to accommodate to whatever light there might be. When, after several minutes, there was still nothing to be seen or heard, he twisted the polarizing lens of the torch to lowest illumination and swept the room with its beam.

By a door at the farther end, standing just as silently as he, was Police Commissioner Brunig. It seemed obvious that Brunig had watched him enter and was waiting to be seen, for he held one cautioning finger to his lips, enjoining silence.

The darkness returned while Jan reviewed swiftly the possible meanings of this unforeseen development. He found he still believed that the policeman was a friend and ally, though his presence here cried for explanation. And explanations there might be. Brunig may well have had Marty under protective surveillance. That Brunig had said he was attending a meeting this evening meant nothing. It was entirely proper for police to cover their activities. Jan waited for the next move.

In a barely audible whisper he heard the words, "Follow me," and simultaneously saw a luminescent

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green star held in the palm of a white-gloved hand. The star moved and Jan followed, one arm extended against possible obstacles. Brunig seemed to know where they were going. The door gave into a straight corridor which after twenty paces became a flight of steps leading down. Jan counted forty treads, about two normal flights, then the corridor continued. Twice the small green star blinked out, and Jan stopped and waited as it seemed he was meant to do. The first stop was for no more than seconds, the second perhaps half a minute.

Down at this level the air had changed in character. It was chilly and moisture laden, and the hardly perceptible current drifting toward them bore an indefinable odor which Jan had not previously encountered on Kort. Jan could hear his own slow footfalls but not those of Brunig, and there was no other sound. They reached the elevated sill of a doorway, and Jan's exploring fingers disclosed, as he passed, that there was a sliding door. He stepped through into a wider corridor or room, and stopped. He was liking the course of events less and less. Brunig seemed to know too much about his surroundings, and it didn't add up. The green six-pointed star disappeared again. Jan waited through thirty slow breaths, then used his torch.

The dim light sufficed to show that he was in a sizable room and that Brunig was gone, obviously through the now closed door in the opposite wall. He had no doubt that the door through which he had just entered was now closed and locked. It was.

So he had been a fool. He had trusted the wrong man and let himself be led into a trap in spite of Holt's warning. So his own name might appear on the next issue of the missing persons list. There were a number of possibilities to consider.

It seemed probable now that there was in fact a kidnapping ring and that it included at least some of the police. Marty Stevens might have been picked up at the entrance to the court and had the presence of mind to break and drop her necklace. She had been coming to see him with something she thought would be useful information. Was Vera Marrock on the other side of the fence? Had she reported to Brunig or somebody else with the result that Marty had been grabbed? In that case, had Brunig been anticipating his arrival, or had he simply improvised on the occasion, to scoop him up too? Might Brunig even have planted the necklace? Wasn't it likely that he, rather than Marty, was the prime object of the kidnap and that she had been used as a convenient decoy? In all probability his phone at the hotel was gimmicked. The vari-

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ous possibilities seemed to have one thing in common: Marty was in this jam with him.

You've been more than usually idiotic, he told himself, and set about to examine his prison. It was about five by eight meters in size and empty of furnishings. Walls and floor were of closely fitted stone, the ceiling apparently made of some acoustic foam. As he stepped away from the wall, it became evident that the room was not a simple rectangle, but an ell.

The other arm of the ell contained four narrow cots, and on one of these lay Marty Stevens without any vestige of clothing. He thought for a moment that she was dead. She was breathing, however, shallowly but regularly, her skin was warm to the touch, and her pulse was strong. Jan drew a shaky breath of relief, then checked an impulse to laugh. Events were becoming grotesque to the point of irrationality. Imagine kidnappers who really only wanted people's clothes.

Marty was obviously under the effects of some one of the thousands of narcotic drugs available among the trading planets. He tickled the sole of one foot and got only the slightest reflex response. She must not, he decided, stay like that. He shifted belongings from coat to trousers and then, with a measure of reluctance which did him no credit, covered her with the coat. It seemed not quite adequate, and he made a further contribution of his shirt.

For the next two hours he prowled the room, partly to keep warm himself, partly in the hope that he was overlooking some means of egress. The two doors were constructed of metal, perfectly smooth, unmarred by handle, knob or keyhole. Periodically he returned to look at Marty, who remained in the same state. He lifted out the other three cots, actually legless pallets, and looked under them. Finally he transferred Marty and looked under hers. There were no concealed exits.

Then he continued to walk.

At last, when he tapped her cheek, her eyes opened. "Hello," she said, too groggy to be curious. "Hello to you," he told her, but her eyes closed again. He gave her fifteen more minutes and found her partially awake.

"Where are my clothes?" she asked.

"I don't know. I found you without any."

"Oh," she said and would have drifted off to sleep again. He slapped her face gently.

"Where did you say my clothes were?"

"You seem to have been kidnapped. Somebody took them."

"Oh. You found me like this?"

"Yes."

"And put your coat over me?"

"Yes."

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She thought that over. "It's all right. You marry me in the end, you know."

"OK. Now I want you to get up and walk around and try to get all the way awake." He turned off the torch while she maneuvered into his coat and returned his shirt.

"OK. Now up. Walk. Follow the spotlight. That's right. Faster than that. Keep ahead of me. One two, one two. Breathe deep."

"This floor is cold," she said. "You're a damn bully—and I hate you."

"Sorry, but you can't have my shoes. You're very cute in that outfit."

"Thank you. Am I decent?"

"Yes, but only just."

"All right. I don't hate you."

He kept her walking for half an hour. "Are you staying with Vera Marrock?" he asked.

"Yes. She's a sort of courtesy aunt. She's wonderful."

"Did you leave there this evening to come down to my hotel to tell me something?"

"Yes, I did. My father . . ."

"Wait. Did you drop your necklace as a clue to where they grabbed you?"

"No. Even if I'd been smart enough, I didn't have time. There were two of them coming toward me. One was a Colony cop, in the gray and red uniform, you know, and the other . . ."

"Wait."

"Why?"

"Almost certainly our conversation is being listened to. Better not say anything you wouldn't want them to hear."

"I understand. Anyway, one of them was a Colony cop and the other was a Terran. A small man. The cop grabbed my arms and the other one sprayed an aerosol in my face—and that's all I remember. No, that's not right. There was a woman. I couldn't stand up and they were holding me and she sprayed the stuff in my face again—and the next thing was when you said hello."

"You weren't hurt in any way?"

"Not that I remember. No. I'm sure not. What I wanted to tell you . . . lean over and I'll whisper it."

A score of pinhole lamps in the ceiling suddenly flooded the room with light. Simultaneously the second door slid open, and Brunig was standing there looking at them. He beckoned and turned away.

"Do we go?" Marty asked.

"Why not? No profit being locked up here."

They followed Brunig through a short, lighted corridor into a smaller room which held nothing but six chairs. Four of these were arranged in a rough semicircle; two were side by side at a little distance. Brunig waved them toward these and seated himself by the three oddly assorted individ-

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uals already present. For a minute nothing was said, and Jan had time to make a quick appraisal of the three he hadn't seen before.

At the end of the row to his left was a man who, from Brunig's description, must be one of the Skaldeans. He was tall and very thin. His face and hands were a dead, dull gray, shiny as putty. His eyelids drooped, his nose contrived to be both flat and pendulous. His pinched-up mouth and indeed his entire face was twisted into an expression of alarm or at least profound worry. He wore a shabby Kortan suit much too big around for him, and in a sort of slow motion he fidgeted continuously.

Next to him was a woman of early middle years, with the squarish face and the coloring of an Idrian. The third was a man, elderly and slight, who was probably pure Terran.

And on the right was Brunig.

Jan was becoming more and more puzzled at Brunig's behavior. He was sitting now with an impassive expression, watching Jan from beneath his heavy brows, his dark eyes hardly visible. His right hand, white gloved, was planted on his knee. The left held a dart gun deadlier, Jan knew, than the stun gun he had been wearing the day before.

The Skaldean spoke. His reedy voice was as lacking in charm as his appearance.

"You are able to speak Kortan?" Each syllable was separately enunciated. A piece of the puzzle, an important piece, slid into place.

"A little," Jan said cautiously.

"I cannot speak Idrian, but I can speak English."

"OK—I mean let's speak English."

"I am Brother Vleck. This woman is Miss Chorn. This man is Walter Lester. That man is police. Brunig. Yes?"

Keeping an eye on Brunig's gun, Jan rose to his feet and bowed slightly. The gun lifted to bear on his chest.

"I am Jan Pierson. This woman is Miss Stevens."

"We know," said Brother Vleck. "Now we wish to talk with reason. There must be no violence."

Jan rose again. "I work for Peace Corps. We also do not like violence."

"That is good. I, Brother Vleck, will tell you we men from Skald come to Kort to bring good. Yes?"

"Go ahead and tell."

"We did bring mikkal. It is a very good drug."

From the tail of his eye Jan saw Marty nod almost imperceptibly.

"Here then," Vleck continued, "are four people to tell you that mikkal is an excellent drug to make you happy, strong and very intelligent. From Idris, Terra, Kort and Skald. We plan now together each next thing to do to bring mikkal to other worlds."

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To the extent that the sad, contorted face could show pleasure, Brother Vleck looked pleased with himself. But hardly, thought Jan, a walking advertisement of the benefits of mikkal.

"Skald is the most happy of worlds to have mikkal, but Skald has not much else." The hesitant monosyllables seemed to hang in the heavy musty air. "Skald has need of every good thing, machines, atom power, plastics. Yes?"

Jan listened with growing realization that the man was trying to sell him. Plotters the Skaldeans might be, but they were surely inept at it. A dozen opportunities could have been made to anesthetize him, as they had Marty, and to search him for weapons. In accordance with Peace Corps practice, he carried, in fact, no lethal weapon, but this they could not have known. It seemed sheer idiocy for Brother Vleck to have arranged such a face-to-face conference, even with four against two, without an effort to disarm him. Well, he had no notion how the Skaldeans thought. Maybe over generations, the use of mikkal had become a weapon in itself. It might be a damned effective one, too.

Marty shivered. This room was as chilly as the other, and Jan's coat provided her with scanty coverage. There was nothing to do about it at the moment.

"Tell me about mikkal," Jan said.

Brother Vleck fumbled awkwardly in a coat pocket and brought out two flat black discs which he displayed on his wrinkled palm.

"Mikkal," he said. "You hold it in your mouth until gone. You will feel then very good."

Miss Chorn and Mr. Lester reacted identically to the sight of the tablets. Their heads swiveled and their eyes moved from Vleck's hand to his face. It was quite evident that they were addicted and on short rations of the drug.

"Thank you, no," said Jan. "Not now." He stood and performed his ritualistic bow.

"You try," Brother Vleck invited "You will feel most good and kind. You will think how Skald can send mikkal to all worlds and be paid with good things. You will think how Pierson can take mikkal to other worlds and how mikkal will be good for the Peace Corps. With mikkal people all will agree and not fight."

"Tell me this," Jan said. He rose and remained standing. "Would we need mikkal regularly after taking one dose?"

Brother Vleck's face again showed something like pleasure. He sensed a promising prospect. "No. You will like it this first time and like it more later. After enough days you must then have it or be very unhappy."

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Jan found himself inclined to believe the Skaldean. Maybe in addition to being incautious plotters, they didn't know when or how to lie. Too, the statement seemed to fit in with the disappearances. People might simply have been kept in detention until they were thoroughly hooked. Maybe those who had reappeared so briefly were now reliably addicted and would do whatever the Skaldeans wanted done.

"How many people on Kort are now taking mikkal?"

"You sit down. Enough. You do not need to know." The Skaldean was looking stubborn or perhaps depressed. You had to live with another race for some time before the nuances of expression became readable. Jan hoped it would never be his fortune to live with Skaldeans long enough for that.

"Why did you pick us up? Us particularly?"

"You will like mikkal. You will be kind and useful."

"Why did you take Miss Stevens' clothes?"

Vleck and Brunig exchanged a look. "You ask too many questions," Vleck said.

Jan said, "I apologize." He rose again and bowed formally, but the bow turned into a flying tackle. He launched himself at Brunig and the gun. His skull connected with Brunig's face, the chair collapsed into fragments, and the gun clattered across the floor. Momentarily, Jan was in the advantageous position of sitting astride the recumbent adversary with both hands on his throat. The Brunig countenance was badly damaged. It was, in fact, twisted completely out of shape, apparently permanently. One side of the face was peeling away, and Jan shifted one hand long enough to seize and tear off the plastic mask and to punch the Skaldean face underneath with all the power he had. He had no idea where his opponent might be vulnerable, but the sad, watery eyes and pendulous nose seemed to call for attention.

The Skaldean screamed in an extremity of terror or pain, but at the same time began to roll over preparatory to getting on hands and knees. Jan was unable to hold him. The looks of Brother Vleck had led him to expect a ramshackle physique, but this man was tremendously strong. Jan shifted to stay astride, grabbed one wrist and with a sudden jerk was able to drop the Skaldean again onto his already abused face. The only way to counteract the other's strength was to apply force in a series of fast and unexpected moves. The Skaldean's reflexes were slow, and Jan succeeded in getting his arm drawn up and back to a point where he should have been able to break it. He couldn't. Inside the heavy padding which simulated Brunig's build, the Skaldean was all bone and gristle.

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It had been only seconds since Jan launched his attack. Now somebody landed on his back and began ineffectively to pummel his head and shoulders. Mr. Lester, Jan realized, was too frail to do much damage, but he could prolong the battle, and the gun might come into play at any moment. He aimed a karate blow at the Skaldean's neck, but Lester's blows, however awkward, served to misdirect his aim, and the edge of his hand connected with the back of his opponent's skull. Or where his skull should have been, but Jan's hand contacted a yielding surface. The blow caused one monumental convulsion and complete collapse. The Skaldean was dead or unconscious, it didn't matter which.

He stood up and tossed Lester over his shoulders to land in an untidy heap in a corner where he lay still. Only then did Jan become aware of the other battle going on a few feet away. Marty and the Idrian woman were locked in tumultuous combat. Marty was underneath, but she was by no means down and out. Chorn was receiving a steady barrage of kicks and blows. This time Jan's karate blow was well placed, and the woman lapsed into unconsciousness. Marty rolled her over and scrambled up. Her face bore a couple of ugly scratches, and one swollen eye gave promise of becoming a beautiful mouse.

"Sorry," she said, panting. "I should have done better. That ghoul grabbed the gun and was out the door with it. The damn woman was holding me and I couldn't stop him."

"You did fine," Jan said, and tried the door. "Locked in again. I wonder. Vleck may have gone for reinforcements, or maybe he was just saving his hide. I think these Skaldeans may be pathological cowards. Well, let's see whether our erstwhile policeman can be of any help." He looked quickly at the three still figures.

"First we'd better get the others tied up, and before that you might get back into my coat. You distract me. Or steal some of Miss Chorn's clothes, if you wouldn't feel overdressed."

Mr. Lester was dead, having evidently hit the wall at the precise angle to break his neck. Jan knew that, as had happened before, he would be haunted by the futile death of an individual who was no more than the victim of a situation, but there was no time now to spare for regrets. Lester gave up his shirt and belt, and Jan, with adequate skill, trussed up Miss Chorn in a way that prevented escape without being seriously painful. He turned his attention to the Skaldean who was beginning to twitch and whimper.

His pockets contained a small amount of Kortan currency, but a wallet of gray leather, which

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looked disturbingly like Skaldean skin, held several bills of very large denomination. The drug business must already have been profitable. And there was a flat, plastic bottle of mikkal tablets.

The padding which was fitted in sections over the man's entire body, was of a foamed plastic, flexible and very tough, and seemed to have been made to order for this particular body. Jan stripped away enough to expose his ankles and wrists, then hoisted him into a chair and, by tearing Lester's coat, tied his arms behind the chair back and his legs to the rungs. By the time he had finished, the Skaldean had opened his eyes and started again to whimper. Jan stood over him.

"We have some more questions. Will you answer them?"

Silence.

"Or must I hurt you again?"

"No, no."

"What is your name?"

"Brother Vlann."

"How many people on Kort are using mikkal?"

"Near to thirty."

"How many Interworlders?"

"Near to fifteen."

"Are they all still detained by you?"

"No. Three have gone home."

"You can trust those three not to tell about you?"

"They need mikkal every day."

"So the other fifteen addicts are Kortans."

"Yes. More were but some died."

"How?"

"One told about us. We took mikkal away from others to punish them. They suicided."

"You let twelve Kortans commit suicide?"

"Yes. It was best."

"You're a sweet pair of bastards. Why did you take away Miss Stevens' clothes?"

Silence.

"Let me tell you. For some reason you don't want her simply to disappear for two weeks or so. Maybe the police have really been keeping an eye on her. You already have a plastic mask that looks just like her, and you have somebody to wear it and impersonate her, but you didn't happen to have any suitable clothes. Am I right?"

Brother Vlann nodded grudgingly.

"It seems like the hard way to do it," Jan said. "Are Skaldeans naturally muddle-headed?"

Vlann was offended. "No. It was a very good plan. You like two women on Kort, Miss Stevens and Miss Takani. We will give Miss Takani the face and garment of Miss Stevens. You will like her then much more, and you will be a good agent for us. Yes?"

Marty was standing near the door. Jan avoided meeting her eye. "You're badly mixed up," he said. "How do you break the mikkal habit?"

"I do not understand."

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"How can you stop taking mikkal?"

The Skaldean shook his head. Jan stepped behind him and placed a thumb against the soft opening in the skull.

Vlann said, "No, no, no," in a rising crescendo. "Please not. I do not know."

Disliking what he was doing, Jan pressed gently.

"Please. A little animal is on Skald, and eats the mikkal plant, no other thing. If a man eats this animal, he does not want mikkal after that."

"Well," Jan said, "it might make sense to a biochemist, and it's not the sort of thing this character would make up."

"It is true," Vlann said.

"Did you know Dr. Stevens? Roger Stevens?"

"Yes."

"Did you kill him? Push him out a window?"

"No, never. We are not violent."

"Did you make a Kortan do it? A student, maybe?"

"Brother Vleck did. Not me."

For a second Jan thought that Marty was about to throw herself at the Skaldean. Then she turned away and sat in the farthest chair.

"How do we get out of here?"

Vlann compressed his lips, then, unexpectedly, he looked at the ceiling. They followed his glance. It was made of rough-surfaced acoustic blocks, but a trap door was easy to see if your attention was directed. Jan stood on a chair and found it unfastened and easily pushed aside. He stepped down.

"OK. We might as well go. Step up on my shoulders."

He boosted her through into the darkness above, then remounted the chair, gripped the sill and pulled himself up. He was still on his knees when the blast of cold spray hit him in the face. Instantly he exhaled sharply and held his breath. The spray lasted for only a second longer. Fooled him, thought Jan. It was very funny that he had fooled somebody, and he lay there in the dark corridor, feet sticking out over the trap door, and laughed about it. He was sleepy and his hands and feet were very cold, but he felt a strong sense of urgency. He forced sleep away and beat his hands against the stone floor of the corridor, but felt nothing.

After a few minutes he could crawl. Marty. He decided that he must catch up with Marty and set off uncertainly. In no great distance he came to a flight of stairs leading to a lower level and between numbness, confusion and total darkness, fell down them head first. Badly shaken and somewhat cut up, he nevertheless gathered himself and was able to stand. After a minute he began to know what he was about. He had, after all, gotten no more than a sniff of the aerosol.

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He cursed himself for a fool for having underestimated Vlann, who had certainly looked up at the trap with the expectation that Vleck would be there; and as a triple-dyed fool for having let Marty go first. The torch was intact. There were two ways to go. He chose to pass the stairway toward the room where they had been imprisoned. The Skaldeans could hardly have the use of unlimited tunnels and cellars.

The doorway to the big room stood open and it was lighted. Mistakes could be made on both sides. Marty lay on the floor, and the Skaldean, crouching over her, was in the act of dropping a mikkal tablet into her mouth. Jan catapulted through as Vleck rose and, with his momentum and body behind it, delivered an uppercut which should have been a knockout. It did no more than send the Skaldean sprawling on his back, but it seemed to end his taste for combat. Wailing, he clambered to his feet and backed step-by-step toward the door and into the ungentle embrace of a young and very large Kortan policeman.

"Watch him. He's strong," Jan said. He dropped to his knees beside Marty and with an exploratory forefinger located the tablet and flipped it out of her mouth.

"You hurt me," Vleck said. With no apparent effort he broke the policeman's grasp and stepped forward. "You hurt me, and I said no violence." He kicked Jan in the face.

A needle bit into Jan's arm and he was suddenly awake. The Kortan girl who had been ministering to him with antiseptic, clips and adhesive bandages smiled charmingly and laid a caressing hand on his chest.

"Go away," he said. For a minute he lay looking around at what was obviously a sort of first-aid room, then he struggled to his feet, becoming aware of a dozen unfamiliar aches and pains. He was wearing his own trousers and shoes, and the nurse or whoever she was helped him get into a clean shirt.

"Commissioner Brunig wants to see you," she told him.

"OK, and I want to see Commissioner Brunig. Is Marty . . . is Miss Stevens . . . ?"

"Right away." He was steered toward Brunig's office. Marty was there. She looked at him and exploded into laughter. "Sorry," she said. "I shouldn't, but have you looked in a mirror?"

"No," said Jan. "Have you?"

"Yes, it's a beauty, isn't it? It's only my second black eye and I'm very proud. There's a washroom over there. Come and take a look at yourself."

While Marty was marked with two long streaks of bright purple antiseptic, there was little of Jan's

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face visible in its natural color. A splint bridged his nose and his lips were puffed and cut. Brunig walked in and stood behind them, watching amusedly.

"You two seem to have been fighting," he remarked. "Want to sit down and tell me about it?"

"OK," Jan said, "but you tell him, Marty. My front teeth seem to be a little loose and it isn't easy to talk. How did you locate us?"

"A lady whose name I don't remember called the station here and said that Miss Stevens had been abducted and you were out looking for her. They got in touch with me at the meeting. A considerable time later one of our patrol cars called in and reported your SOS. There was no excuse for the delay. We had some deputies on hand by then, and we fanned out from the spot where your light was seen. There are a lot of tunnels along Norvei Avenue, both sides and crossing under it. We were lucky."

"You have the Skaldeans?"

"Yes, and since that is the important thing, would you rather put off talking until tomorrow? Do you feel up to it?"

Jan nodded and looked at Marty. She proved to be a good reporter, starting at the beginning and leaving out nothing she knew.

Presently Brunig held up a hand. "About the Kortan suicides. Dr. Carmody is here at headquarters talking to our coroner. He should hear this. It seems to solve his problem."

Carmody was phoned for and came in with the coroner. The story was told again.

"I should have guessed in advance," Marty added. "My father wrote me just before he was killed that he was worried about two of his students who had gotten addicted to a drug. He knew they were getting it from a Skaldean, too. That's what I was going to tell you, Jan, just before the excitement started."

Dr. Carmody rose and stood staring out the window.

"Somewhere then you have a dozen Kortans addicted to this mikkal, who will kill themselves if they can't get it. And another dozen or so Interworlders whose withdrawal symptoms we don't know about. What will you do, Commissioner?"

"We have nearly three hundred tablets, and there will probably be more when we find out where those two have been living. They kept moving around. We shall broadcast that we have them. Perhaps the addicts will show up and perhaps we can hold them with diminishing doses."

"Up to your own MDs," said Carmody, "but I'll offer one suggestion that has worked before. Try switching them to morphine. It's an old Terran narcotic, very potent, but addiction is easy to

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cure. By the way, Pierson, I called on the ambassador. Nothing wrong with him that I could see from across the desk. Getting on in years, of course, but looks as healthy as a young horse."

Jan recalled the gray face and waxy hands.

"How was his color?"

"Fine.'"

"But it shouldn't be. Commissioner, I suggest that one of your people pick up Mr. Holt."

"Pick up the ambassador?" Brunig looked properly horrified.

"Invite him to headquarters or a conference. However you want to do it. There's at least a possibility that what Dr. Carmody saw was a man in a mask. If they could duplicate you, they could duplicate Holt, and an agent in that spot could be useful."

Brunig picked up a phone and gave orders, and Carmody shortly took his leave. The policeman looked at Jan and Marty from under heavy brows.

"So now," he said, "you two need some rest. What are you planning to do?"

"Get married," said Marty.

Jan looked at her. "I've never married a girl with a black eye."

"It's of no importance. After the way you were hauling me around all night with no clothes on or practically none, I hope you're not going to try to get out of it. You promised, you know. You said OK."

"Did I?" said Jan. "Well, OK."

"But there is one thing," Marty added.

"Yes?"

"Who is Miss Takani?"

Commissioner Brunig became very busy at his desk.

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Long-time readers of this magazine will be familiar with the by-line of P. M. Hubbard, who has proved himself a master of the horrifying tale with such stories as THE GOLDEN BRICK *(January 1963). His first new story in some time concerns a couple who are building a house upon the rubble of post-holocaust London. It's a deceptively simple yarn, and thoroughly chilling . . .*

THE HOUSE

by P. M. Hubbard

WE EMIGRATED TO THE NORTH London territories early in the summer and started to build as soon as we had put up our temporary hut. Our grant was about a mile square. It was fairly fine rubble, pretty wet in winter and thickly grown with scrub and the larger annuals, broken by coppices of hazel and alder. At the side of the stream there were even some well-grown willows. It is always difficult in places like this to be certain of the original contours. The drainage lines are generally the best indication. Here the stream skirted a little patch of high ground just northeast of the center of the square, and that was the obvious place to build, though you can never be certain until you start to get the foundations down.

We were left very much to ourselves, though there were other grantees already in possession not more than a few miles away. One lot of them had most of their house up already, an ingeniously rusticated version of the picture-window style of the sixties, with the openings filled in with stone louvers. Glass was still scarce in anything but pretty small sizes. It amused us, in this paradise of colonial free enterprise, to remember the stories they used to write about life after the war. Most of them had gone in for whole-hearted barbarism, with people in skins and atavistic cultures. Some had

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gone to the other extreme, with oppressive collectivism and an all-pervading central authority based on the control of the few remaining resources. What none of them had foreseen was what had happened. But they might have guessed. The character of a people does not change except over very long periods, even in the face of cataclysmic disturbance. The English, still quite a lot of them, though only a handful of their pre-war population, had set about colonizing their own waste lands with the same mixture of cheerful opportunism and almost mystical faith that had carried their forebears into the outback of Australia and the far west of North America. The scale was smaller, but so were the numbers. The government, what there was of it, dished out land grants and allotments of things like seed and cement and iron sheeting. The rest was up to you, but then we were used to self-help by then. It was lonely and back-breaking, but not without a certain exhilaration as long as things went well. Laura and I never for a moment doubted we could make a go of it.

It was all immensely quiet. There were quite a lot of birds now, but they did not sing. People said they were deaf, but I do not know how they could prove it. There was too much to do to bother about the hearing capacity of birds. The rest of the fauna were creatures that had always been pretty silent, even before the war. The wind ruffled the scrub all round us, and when there was no wind, you could hear the stream trickling over the broken stones. We ourselves made plenty of noise during the day. Only at night we tended to talk in whispers. But we did not talk much at night anyway. Mostly we were too tired to do anything but sleep.

There was quite a lot of humus now in the lower places, but higher up it was mostly bare rubble, with a few trees that had somehow got their roots down to something they could live on. You made a seedbed by clearing off the bigger lumps of stone and hard-core from the surface and scratching up what was left. That was man's work. The weaker vessels harvested the scrub for anything that would root down. You took all the greenery you could without killing the plants. It was a slow business. In the meantime, there was food from the depot, but it all had to be carried, and it was a long way over difficult going. I suppose some time we should get pack animals, but for the present, over and above things like rats, man was the only animal the land would carry.

There were no trees on our hillock. This was a bad sign in one way, because it suggested rubble a long way down. Not that this mattered for a building site, so

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long as it was fully settled, but you heard stories of grantees getting houses up and then having the place cave in under them. And there was no way of knowing. You could get down so far, but you never really knew what was underneath.

You turned up quite a number of artifacts among the rubble. They were all pretty fragmentary, but some of them had their uses. And bones, too, of course, but this did not worry us at all now. After all, the whole area had been very thickly populated when the war started, and everything went up pretty well together. The bones were as fragmentary as the rest. You put them in with the compost. As Laura said, better dead bones than live Injuns. Unlike our forebears, we did not have to dispute possession with aborigines, or indeed with anyone else. You got your title from the government, and they were glad enough to have you take it, providing they thought the area could be reclaimed at all. No one else was interested. There was more reclaimable territory than there were people ready to have a go at reclaiming it.

There were ghosts, or so it was said. At any rate, there were places, sometimes quite big areas, which no one wanted to take on because they had a reputation that way. Considering some of the things that were supposed to have happened during the war, this did not seem particularly surprising. The government did not officially recognize ghosts, but they had their records of repeated failure of colonization in certain areas and of the reasons, at any rate the official reasons, for these failures. After a bit they simply stopped making grants there. They did not have to say why. There was no question of refusing, because no one was likely to apply for these places anyway. And there were, as I have said, still ample areas of reclaimable stuff which no one had tried his hand at, and which therefore had not been able to acquire a bad name anyway. Even in the bad places the thing would probably settle itself in time. In the meantime it was easier just to leave them alone.

The first thing, as I have said, was to decide where you were going to build. You did this partly on the suitability of the site itself, drainage, water supply and so on, and partly on the look of the surface immediately round it. Obviously to start with, you wanted to concentrate your reclamation work round the homestead, both to save labor and carrying and because you wanted any food you could grow immediately to hand. You do not put your kitchen garden half a mile from your kitchen. Laura and I stood on the top of our hillock and looked round us. Our hut was there, complete and hab-

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itable, on the side of the stream fifty yards down the slope, and we had reached the moment of decision.

It was a clear evening, I remember, with yellow sunlight and a slight breeze from the west. The empty world stretched round us, flat over all, but full of the curious, abrupt undulations of rubble country. It was all bright green now, looked across like this from a bit of a height, but you knew the green was not more than skin deep. It would look very different in winter. Underfoot—under our very feet as we stood—it felt, and even sounded, porous, almost hollow. The surface, not all the time, but every now and then, shifted slightly when you stepped on it, and you never quite knew how far down the movement went, or would go if you pushed it far enough. As I say, you had to take a chance on it. It had all been there for some time now, and the sort of houses we built did not run to much height and weight. You built, of course, with the rubble itself. The cement they allowed you did not go very far, and unless the thing was very small on plan, you had to choose between a cemented floor with largely dry-stone walls and a floor of pounded rubble with a bit of masonry round you. Most people put the cement into the walls. That was why a dry site was essential. With the grant we had, there was really only one decision we could make.

We looked at each other in the middle of that empty, silent world. I smiled at Laura, putting into my smile all the assurance which suddenly, and I think for the first time, I did not feel. She smiled back when I smiled, and then, when we were still looking at each other, shivered violently. For a split second more we looked at each other, keeping up the smiles, and then I held out my hand to her, and she took it quickly and clung to it with a little involuntary touch of desperation.

"This is it," I said. "It's the only possible place. Agreed?"

She nodded, and I said, "Good," and we started to walk down the slope towards the hut, still holding hands, over the not quite solid surface of our joint property. We made love in our hut that night before we went to sleep, and I started leveling the building site next morning.

Obviously, with a job like that you leveled down and leveled up. You had to start by getting the loose stuff off the top, and you did this until you got down to what looked like a reasonably stable and compact surface. Then you had to fill this in and level it up until you had got the area you wanted. With the tools I had, it was a slow business. Once I had the superficial debris off, I found that the whole top of the mound was made up of pretty big lumps

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of concrete and old masonry, all keyed into each other like dry-stone walling on a very big scale. A lot of it had to come off, because the top was rounded and in any case was too small for the house we wanted to build. There was nothing for it but to take the infernal jigsaw to pieces, bit by bit, and roll the bits out onto the surrounding slopes as I got them off. There were spaces between the lumps, and dry grit everywhere that ran down into the spaces when you moved anything, but nothing like the beginning of humus. I was not surprised there were no trees. As a building site, I had mixed feelings about it. The size of the stuff promised stability. On the other hand, if something did shift, the disturbance would be proportionate. You did not know what spaces there might be underneath. There was nothing I could do about that. All I could do was work down to the sort of area I wanted and then bring up smaller stuff from lower down the slopes to fill in between the big lumps until I had a continuous surface. Laura would be able to help me with that, but for the moment it was heavy going.

I do not know how long this part of the job took. I just went on day after day breaking the stuff out and rolling the lumps to the edge of my slowly growing platform. Laura was busy on the seed-beds round the hut, but every evening she would come up to see what progress I had made during the day. Then, if the weather was fine, we would sit on the edge, looking out over the green wilderness and imagining ourselves looking out of our new windows over the growing crops. There was always a breeze blowing at this time of the evening, and the air came very fresh and sweet on our weather-beaten and mostly rather grimy faces.

It was a moment of reassurance and contentment, and we carried the mood with us when we went down to the hut to wash and have supper and get to bed. If I woke in the night, and always when I woke in the morning, the disquiet would well up again in my mind. I did not know if the same thing happened to Laura. I used to catch a look on her face sometimes as if she were listening for something in the silence, but I never mentioned the thing to her, nor she to me.

Then we ran into a day of breathless heat. The sun came up in a cloudless sky and the air did not move at all. I worked all the morning with the sweat running into my eyes, and in the middle of the afternoon I was suddenly conscious of a queasiness, a sort of faint nausea, which I had not felt before. I supposed it was the sun, but it worried me. Laura liked the heat. She came up at the usual time, and I saw her smiling as she

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scrambled over the edge of the platform. She came towards me over the crazy, gaping surface, and as she came I saw her face change. We looked at each other, and I know—because we told each other afterwards—that under the tan and dust, the blood had left both our faces. She took her eyes off me and looked round her. She looked all over the now considerable space of the platform, but did not find whatever it was she was expecting to see. When she looked at me again, her eyes were very wide open and her nostrils slightly dilated, like an animal under the threat of danger. She said, "Let's go down." I nodded and went with her, leaving my tools where they were.

We went straight down to the stream without saying anything, and both, driven by the same instinct, plunged our faces into the water. We sluiced it over our heads and rinsed our mouths with it. I even snuffed a little into my nostrils and blew it out again. Then we knelt back on our heels and looked at each other. It was dead quiet except for the chuckle of the water over the stones. The air was fresher over the moving water. The chill and the clean air took the queasiness out of my stomach, but that did not ease my mind. I said, "What was it?"

She said, "A sort of—a sort of smell. Hadn't you noticed?"

"I knew there was something," I said. "I think it came on gradually all day. I didn't know—I felt sickish, but I thought it was the sun."

She shook her head. "It wasn't the sun," she said. "It's there all right. But only up there."

I said, "It can't be a smell. There's nothing to smell, not after all these years. You know that. It's all sterile long since."

She shook her head again, doubtfully. "I don't know," she said. "Some sort of gas, trapped somewhere, and brought out by the heat?"

I said again, "It can't be. All the gases were clear years ago. And the whole mound is porous. It couldn't hold them." I got up. "Anyway," I said, "it's all right here. Let's go in. We'll track it down in the morning."

She nodded and we went into the hut. We did not mention the thing again. Some time in the night I woke to the sound of rain drumming on the iron roof, and behind it I could hear a fresh wind rustling the bush all round us. It gave me a feeling of vast relief. I went to sleep again, and when I woke, it was bright, cool weather, with piles of white clouds chasing each other across a blue sky. We went up the mound together. My tools lay where I had left them, slightly touched with rust after the rain, but there was nothing else. Whatever it was, it had gone.

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It blew all that day, and all day I worked on the platform at the top of the mound. Every now and then, when I thought about it, I drew in long breaths through my nostrils, testing the air, but each time the wind came chilly and fresh, with no offense in it. Late in the evening, when I was ready to pack up for the day, I paced the platform in both directions, and found that I had the space I wanted with a reasonable margin to spare. Tomorrow I could start filling in and leveling over the uneven, fissured surface I had achieved. As I have said, I thought Laura could help me with this. The worst part of the job was over. It was a landmark, and we went to bed that night in a mood of mild exhilaration. I woke up in the darkest part of the night and heard something moving outside the hut.

Laura was still asleep, and I did not wake her. The wind had gone completely, and the only background noise was the familiar voice of the stream. Against this I heard, just for a moment or two as I woke up, a sort of scuttling, as if something was dodging about on Laura's seedbeds or among the odd stuff lying at the back of the hut. The only things we knew of for certain were rats. There were also, of course, other people not so very many miles away, but this did not sound human. Only if it was a rat, it was a very big one. I lay there listening, half believing I might have imagined it when I was not fully awake. I was fully awake now. For a while I heard nothing except the stream and Laura's steady breathing. Then, just as I was going to turn over and try to get back to sleep, I heard it again. It was fainter this time and further away, but if anything, more definite than the first time. It was the sound of feet, small, soft feet, I did not know how many, scampering away over the rubble.

Next morning I thought up something I wanted from the back of the hut and went round there. There was nothing to see, but Laura had come with me, and I could not make any sort of systematic search without involving myself in explanations. I went up to the platform by myself. Laura had a third sowing of beans to do, but said she would come up and help me when she had done it. I had not been there long when I heard her calling from down by the hut. I went to the edge of the platform and saw her starting up the slope towards me. She looked worried, not scared, but worried. She said, "Jim, do come." I went down to her and she took my hand and led me down towards the seedbeds behind the hut. She said, "I'm afraid something's been at the beds. I don't know—please come and see."

"What is it?" I said.

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"The beans," she said, "the first two sowings."

"Have they been taken?"

"I'm not sure. Some of them, I think. Only—" She led me to the side of the bed and pointed, and we stood there looking at the damage. The seed had not been systematically dug out. The rows had been scuffled up at random, and there were beans lying about on the turned up compost. Some of them had started to sprout, and the shoots had been knocked off them. You could see them all over the place, a bright pale green against the dark brown of the bed. I did not know if the beans would sprout again. There was an indefinable suggestion of senseless malice in the whole thing that turned my stomach, but I told myself that it might be only in my own mind. Whatever had done it, the damage was real enough.

I looked over the bed and others near it. The surface was too soft to take anything like a clear imprint. There were small, dimpled marks everywhere, but it was impossible to get any picture of what had made them. I turned and looked over my shoulder and then turned back quickly to the bed, not wanting Laura to see what I had seen. I have said there was no clear imprint, but there was some sort of trail, a general direction of movement to and from the damaged bed. The trail disappeared when it reached the unworked rubble, but so far as it went, it pointed towards the mound.

Laura got the beans back in as best she could and went on with her third sowing. There was nothing else she could do. We built a sort of fence round the bed, using such materials as we had or could collect, but the protection it afforded was not much, and in any case we did not know what we were trying to protect the bed against. Laura had even less idea than I had; she thought it might be some sort of big bird, which was reasonable enough for anyone who had not heard what I had heard in the night. I myself at this stage had no very clear idea in my head, but I suppose I thought we were up against some sort of animal much larger than anything we had been led to expect. That at least was what my reason told me, and by day I saw it like that, a worrying but practical problem. In the back of my mind, and more consciously when I woke up in the night and listened, I was frightened. But all I heard in the night was the wind, which blew day and night, not hard but steadily, and always from the southwest, from that day until the end of the whole business.

Twice I got up early, when it was just light outside, but before Laura was awake, and went round to the back of the hut. There was no more damage, but things had been moved, pushed about and

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upset, as if something had blundered against them without knowing what they were or why they were there. There was a gap in our fence, and something had moved across the bed, but the seed was not disturbed. I mended the fence and went back inside.

We started filling in the floor of the platform, but found it much more difficult than I had expected. My idea had been to feed smaller stuff into the crevices between the main lumps until they were filled to the same general level and then to get some sort of even surface, packed rubble or even rough paving, laid down over the whole area. The trouble was that the crevices, or some of them at least, would not be filled. It is like pouring water down a drain. Anything which was small enough to go between the surface lumps simply disappeared. Even if it did not happen at once, it happened later. We would leave a crevice filled to the top when we stopped work in the evening, and when we came up on to the mound next morning, it would be gaping up at us again, with all the filling drained out of it. This was always near the center of the platform. Round the edges, and especially where I had put the stuff I had taken off the original top of the mound, we had a level, continuous surface within a week or so of starting work on it. But in the middle we were getting nowhere. One day when we got to the top of the slope, Laura went to the center of the platform ahead of me. Then, before I came up with her, she simply turned on her heel and walked back to the edge. She walked straight past me, not looking at me. She plumped herself down on the level surface we had made and put her head on her hands. I turned and went back after her. "Cheer up," I said. "I'll think of something. I think we're tackling this the wrong way."

She did not look up even then. It was not like her at all. She said, "Jim, what's the use? The whole damned thing's hollow. How can we build a house here? We don't know what's underneath."

I wished, as soon as she had said it, that she had not put it like that. I knew she had put into words, much too clearly for comfort, what was in the back of my mind and what I suppose must all along have been in the back of hers, even though she did not know as much as I did. For a moment I was on the point of surrender. Then I said, "Look, leave this to me, will you? Give me a day or two to try to get the job finished. Then if you're not happy with it, we'll think again."

For a moment she did not move or say anything. Then she shivered suddenly, as she had that first evening we had come up

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here. But she said, "All right. Try if you like. Only—" She did not say whatever she had been going to say. She just got up and walked straight off down the slope, leaving me on top of the mound. I walked back to the center of the platform and looked at those gaping crevices, and the more I looked at them, the less I liked them.

But there was only one thing to do. I gave up the idea of packing them from underneath and concentrated on blocking them from on top. I made a whole collection of lumps of about the right size and started fitting them into the tops of the crevices. If a bit was small enough to go right inside, I rejected it and found something bigger. If it was just too big, I wedged it in as far as it would go and then hammered it home. I worked with a sort of desperation, and all the time the wind blew across the top of the mound, throwing up a small cloud of dust and grit every time I moved anything. All that day I thrashed about among the stones and broken masonry, trying to seal off the network of gaping fissures that led down into the mound, I did not know how far, to whatever lay underneath. I worked from the center outwards, and by evening I had the whole central area sealed off, leaving open only a ring of smaller fissures between that and the surface we had already laid. I did not like leaving the cavities under the seal, but I thought if only I could get a continuous surface right across the platform, and keep it there, I should be able to forget about what was underneath. I was dead tired when I went down in the evening. Laura asked how I was getting on. I said, "All right," and she asked no further questions.

The constraint between us would not let me rest. I could not get the job off my mind by talking about it, and when we went to bed, I knew I was too tired to sleep. If I began to doze off, I found myself choosing stones and ramming them into the cavities and wondering if they would stay there. Finally I gave it up and roused myself completely. I knew enough about sleeplessness to know that the only thing, once you have reached a certain stage, is to make a fresh start. Laura was sleeping peacefully. She was always a better sleeper than I was, whatever there was to worry about. I got up quietly and moved the shutter over the window. There was a youngish moon low in the sky with a scurry of broken clouds driving continuously across it. There was not much light outside, but it was not completely dark. I moved the shutter back quietly. Then I put on a coat and went outside.

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The mound stood up in very faint silhouette between me and the bright, racing clouds. Near at hand I could see just enough not to fall over things. I could hear nothing but the wind worrying at the scrub all round me. I started to walk up the slope, picking my way over the rubble and every now and then looking up at the dark line above me and its continuously moving background. I think I saw the thing once or twice before I really took it in. Then I stopped and waited for it, but even then the explanation did not occur to me. What I had seen was a streak of cloud moving faster than the rest, so that it scudded across even the moving curtain behind it. You see that, of course, quite often; a cloud lower than the others and moving at a higher apparent speed. It was the suddenness and repetition of this that made me admit, at last, that it was not a cloud I was looking at. As I myself had been doing all day, something on the flat top of the mound was throwing up, at irregular intervals, small clouds of dust.

What surprises me, looking back, is that my immediate feeling was one of furious anger. Something, in its mindless, malicious way, was busy undoing the work I had sweated at all day, and I could not bear the idea of it. I found myself running up the slope towards the lip of the platform. I did not shout or make a noise deliberately, because I did not want to wake Laura, but I made no effort to be quiet about it. Even so, the wind would have carried away most of the noise I made, only just before I got to the top, I put my foot on a loose stone and came down on my hands and knees, sending a scatter of rubble down the slope behind me. That was why, when I got to the top, I never quite saw what it was. All I saw, in the flickering uncertain light, was a scurry of moving bodies disappearing over the far edge of the platform. There were three or four of them, and they ran low on the ground, in complete silence, with a faint sheen on them from the reflected moonlight. They did not look like anything I had ever seen.

I stood there, with the wind blowing across me, suddenly horrified at what I had nearly done. I did not want to go any further. Even from where I was, I could see what had been happening in the middle of the platform. Half the fissures were open again, and the stones I had sealed them with were scattered everywhere. I turned and went back down the slope, trying desperately not to hurry. I told myself that another fall might break an ankle, and the thought of lying in that place unable to move scared the wits out of me. I picked my way down to the level, never looking behind

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me, and then I fairly ran to the hut. At the door I forced myself to stop and get my breath back. Then I went very quietly inside. Laura was still asleep. I took my coat off and lay down, staring at the invisible roof and listening for movements outside. Nothing happened at all. When it was almost fully light, I fell asleep; and when I woke up, with Laura's worried face looking down at me, I knew the thing could not go on.

I fended off her questions somehow and went up to the platform at the usual time. I did not even bother to look at the mess in the middle. I went straight across to the far side and looked down the slope. Nothing showed on the rubble at all, but I thought I knew what I had to look for. Southward, from the foot of the slope, the country stretched away, almost level, for a mile or more. The thin green vegetation covered it lightly, but there was no concealment in it anywhere. What I wanted was nearer at hand. I went straight down to the bottom of the slope, moving with desperate caution. Then I turned and looked up the way I had come.

The rubble slope was very much the same as it was on the other side of the mound, a jumble of small stuff worked in very closely together, with the occasional bigger lump jutting out of it or lying flat against it. There was no opening in it anything like big enough to let in what I had seen the night before. I went to the first of the flat pieces and looked at it carefully. There was nothing to see. The grit and small stones lay packed tight all round it. They even covered one edge altogether, so that I could not see the full extent of it. I moved on up the slope. The next flat piece was much the same, but the third was different. For a little distance below it the face of the rubble was smooth and close packed, as if it had been trampled down. There was no loose grit lying on it. The stone itself was almost rectangular, and showed all its edges, but it looked solid enough. I put my fingers round its upper edge and pulled.

I thought the stone was going to fall on top of me, but it stopped, hanging over me as I lay on the rubble. It was pivoted almost on its center. I think the pivot was accidental, but there was a sort of black grease smeared on the points of contact which eased the swing. I struggled up onto one elbow and stared into the dark opening behind the stone. There was black grease everywhere. All the rock faces were ribbed with it. I was not so much frightened as filled with a sort of bottomless apprehension. Then a wave of warm air poured over me out of the mouth of the

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tunnel, and with it the most appalling smell I have ever smelt. I put my hand over my nose and mouth, trying not to draw breath, and over the top of my fingers saw something coming out of the far end of the passage towards me. I do not think it could have stood upright in the passage, but I do not think in any case it wanted to. It came with its legs doubled under it and the callused knuckles of one small, spade-shaped hand turned down on the stone in front of it. The other hand was across its eyes, as if the daylight blinded it. It was quite smooth, and mushroom-colored, and greasy all over.

I did not try to get to my feet. I slithered away from it on the rubble slope, and as I did so, it put down for a moment the hand that shielded its eyes. There was no face to speak of, but the eyes were a bright, pale blue and entirely human. I felt myself starting to roll. I think I rolled over twice, and when I came to a stop, I heard the thud as the stone swung back into place above me. Then I got to my feet and ran.

I ran down the scrub towards the stream. I had the same instinct to cleanse myself as I had had before, but this time the water in my mouth made me very sick. I did not go back to the hut until I reckoned myself at least reasonably presentable. Laura was not working on the beds. She was sitting by the side of them, staring at them. She got up when she heard me coming. I said, "It's no good. We can't make a go of it here. We'll have to try somewhere else."

She gave me a quick look full of unspeakable relief. Then she turned away and nodded. "I agree," she said. "Can we go today, do you think?"

I said, "Let's try, anyhow." She did not ask any questions. I do not think I could have answered them if she had. I do not see how I could have told her, or anyone else, that we could not build a house here because there were parties already in possession, parties who had been here a very long time and did not, naturally, want another house built on top of their own.

Coming next month

part one of a new two-part novel by Poul Anderson,

OPERATION CHANGELING

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THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING PEOPLE

by Isaac Asimov

IN APRIL 1965, I WAS ASKED TO prepare a novelization of the script of a movie that was then in production. The movie was "Fantastic Voyage," and it eventually received a couple of Oscars for special effects.

To put the plot in a nutshell, a submarine and its crew of five are miniaturized to microscopic size and injected into the bloodstream of a dying man in order that they might perform a brain operation from within and save his life. They had exactly sixty minutes in which to do it, for at the end of that time the miniaturization effect would wear off. If they were still inside the man at that time, their re-expansion would, of course, kill him.

Naturally, there are all sorts of untoward events that delay the operation and, in the end, the crew get out of the man (whose life they save) with something like two seconds to spare.

I had never made a novel out of a movie script before, and since I am all but incapable of resisting the chance of tackling something new, I eventually let them talk me into doing it.

I read the script and said, "I will have to change the ending, if I do the novel."

They were alarmed at once. "Why?"

"Well," I said, "at the end, the ship and the villain are ingested by a white corpuscle and the other four get out. Right? But the ship and the villain stay inside. I'll have to get them out, too."

That puzzled them. "Why?"

"Because the ship and the villain will expand if they stay inside the patient, and that will kill him."

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They thought about that a while and then they said, "But the white corpuscle *ate* them."

I said, "That doesn't matter; the atoms are still there and as long as they're still there, even if they are all separated and evenly scattered—"

Then I stopped, because I realized that they were staring at me blankly. I said, "Look, I'm going to change the ending. If you don't want me to change the ending, fine; I won't do the book. But if you want me to do the book, I will change the ending, and I don't want my ending changed back by Hollywood. Okay?"

So they said, okay, and in the book I managed to work out a way of getting the white corpuscle, *with* the ingested ship and villain, out of the patient. Nor did Hollywood change it back. Indeed, Hollywood didn't change one word of my novel, I am glad to say. In the motion picture, however, the ship was still left inside the patient.

This had its annoyances, too, for my book (I write quickly) came out six months before the movie (they work slowly) so that everyone thought the movie had been made from the book, rather than vice versa. People who saw the movie and didn't read the book therefore wrote me shocked letters about the ending, and I had to answer them patiently.

The whole business of "shrinking"—a well-known science fictional motif—is based entirely on several indefensible assumptions; such as the assumption that the law of conservation of energy can be ignored and that atoms don't exist.

Let us suppose, for instance, that we have the kind of situation that was postulated in such well-known science fiction stories as Ray Cummings' antiquated "The Girl in the Golden Atom," or in Henry Hasse's excellent "He Who Shrank," or in the well-done Richard Matheson movie, "The Incredible Shrinking Man" (the title of which I borrowed with modification for this article).

In these and other stories the shrinkage is carried into the submicroscopic, but we shall be moderate about it and begin by supposing that a man is shrunk to exactly half his ordinary height.

In that case he is also shrunk to exactly one-eighth his ordinary volume (see JUST RIGHT, F & SF, March 1969). There are three alternatives as to what can have happened to account for that volume shrinkage:

1) Perhaps the atoms making up his body are squeezed more closely together.

2) Perhaps seven-eighths of the atoms of his body, drawn proportionately from all parts, are discarded.

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3) Perhaps the atoms themselves shrink.

The first possibility is reminiscent of the situation in gases. A volume of ordinary gas can, without too much difficulty, be compressed to one-eighth its volume by squeezing out most of the space between its atoms or molecules.

However, though the atoms and molecules in gases are widely spread apart and can easily be forced more closely together, those in liquids and solids are in virtual contact and can be pushed more closely together only very slightly even by enormous pressures. The pressure at the center of Jupiter might suffice to reduce the volume of a man considerably, but not nearly down to one-eighth normal. Before that could come to pass, the atomic structure itself would break down.

To be sure, once the atomic structure breaks down, shrinkage can continue to very small volumes, something that takes place in the interior of stars. Unfortunately, human beings would find difficulty in surviving such conditions, wouldn't they?

So throw out possibility one.

The second possibility seems much more plausible. You just go through the human body and retain one out of every eight molecules, keeping all the different types of molecules in proper proportion. (It would be like taking a Gallup poll of the body.)

This assumes, however, that the human body can get along on only one-eighth of its molecules. To be sure, a much smaller number of molecules than those we possess is compatible with life. Mice live; bacteria live.

But what about the brain? The normal brain has a mass of three pounds. Get rid of seven-eighths of all its molecules and what is left has a mass of six ounces. It doesn't matter how carefully you keep the brain-molecules present in appropriate proportions, a six-ounce brain is not large enough to maintain intelligence at human level.

And if you're going to quarrel with that, then what about reducing the human being still further, as is done in every science fiction story that deals with shrinkage?

Throw out possibility two.

That leaves only the third possibility, that the atoms themselves shrink. In that case, the shrinking people have their atoms neither forced more closely together nor discarded one after the other. To themselves, they remain as they always were. In terms of atoms, they are just as comfortably-spaced and just as numerically-complex as ever.

It is possibility three that I specifically stated I was using in the novel version of "Fantastic Voyage." (The movie ignored the whole matter.)

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But we're not out of the woods. Suppose the atoms themselves shrink. What happens to their mass? Here there are two possibilities:

1) Perhaps the mass remains unchanged.

2) Perhaps the mass shrinks in proportion to volume.

The first possibility would quickly produce unacceptable complications. It would mean that a 6-foot, 200-pound man would be reduced to a 3-foot, 200-pound man. Instead of being roughly as dense as water, he would become roughly as dense as steel, and he would become even denser as he shrank. By the time he was two feet high, he would be denser than platinum, and if he were reduced to microscopic size, he would squeeze so much mass into so small a volume that he would sink through the rocks of the crust to the center of the earth, a tiny speck of what we call "degenerate matter."

Throw out possibility one.

The second possibility would keep a man's complexity and density exactly right. But then what happens to the excess mass? The only thing that can possibly happen to disappearing mass (as far as we know) is to have it change into energy, and the shrinking man would thus become a super-powerful nuclear bomb.

What I did in the novel version of "Fantastic Voyage" was to make use of this second possibility and throw in a little vague analogy to the shrinkage of a photograph by the manipulation of three-dimensional optics. The reader could assume that a four-dimensional effect was involved with the excess mass disappearance. The mass went into hyperspace during the shrinking operation, I suppose, and came out of it again in the re-expansion.

This is fantasy, of course, but it shows, at least, that the problem exists. (In the movie, the matter of mass was entirely ignored.)

In the movie, and in the novel as well, the submarine is reduced to roughly the size of a large bacterium before being injected into the blood stream, so we can say that the human beings on board were 1/100,000 centimeter tall (or 1/250,000 inch, if you prefer).

This means that if they were of average height to begin with, all their measurements have shrunk down to 1/17,000,000 of what they were. To themselves, with their shrunken atoms and their diminished mass, they seem perfectly normal. They and their submarine seem, to themselves, to be of normal size while the entire universe outside the submarine has increased its measurements by 17,000,000 in every direction.

Consequently, the blood vessels are huge conduits, the white corpus-

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cles are big enough to swallow a submarine whole without discomfort and so on.—The picture went that far, anyway, but what about atoms themselves?

An atom is about 1/100,000,000 centimeter in diameter. Increase its measurements 17,000,000 times in all directions and it becomes about ⅙ of a centimeter across. Since the important gases in the atmosphere (oxygen and nitrogen) are made up of molecules which each contain two atoms, the molecules in ordinary, unshrunken air would seem ellipsoids that are ⅓ of a centimeter across at their longest diameter—at least to the shrunken people.

This means that the unshrunken atoms and molecules would be *big enough to see* as far as those shrunken people were concerned. The movie, however, does not take that into account.

At one point, the submarine runs short of air, and so it sticks a snorkel into the patient's lungs and fills up its tanks with fresh air. But the snorkel opening is not much larger in diameter than the air molecules in the patient's lungs. Can you imagine how long it would take to draw air through the snorkel under those conditions. A slow leak in a tire would be speedy in comparison.

What's more, once the ship is filled with unshrunken air, how do you get those huge molecules up your nostrils and into your own shrunken lungs? And what do you do with those molecules once they are in your lungs? Can your own shrunken red corpuscles handle them?

I didn't think of that till after I had finished the novel, and I had to go back in a wild perspiration to revise several pages. I used a device to shrink some of the air in the patient's lungs *before* pulling it through the snorkel and into the ship.

Here's another point. The men on the shrunken submarine communicated with the outside world by radio. However, the radio was shrunken and the radio waves it emitted would have only 1/17,000,000 the wavelength they would have had in the unshrunken state. The radio would be emitting light waves. They might seem like radio waves to the operator on board the submarine, but they would be tiny flashes of light to the men in the unshrunken world and using them for communication radio-fashion would be tricky.

And how would our men on the submarine see? By the light waves produced by their shrunken light-sources? But these light waves would be gamma rays to the outside world—to the patient in whose blood stream they were cruising, for instance. Not enough to damage him, I hope, though I didn't bother to do any calculations.

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I let the radiation bit go because (once again) I thought of it too late and was lazy enough to feel that no one would catch it. I underestimated my readers, of course. One sharp-minded young man picked it up and was down on me at once. I had to write back a confession of guilt.

The movie-makers had the heroine (Raquel Welch) attacked by antibodies, but hadn't the faintest notion of what an antibody would look like if it were properly enlarged. Of course, with Miss Welch on screen, who studies the antibodies, anyway?

The antibodies are, of course, protein molecules, and I imagined they would look like glimmering little balls of wool perhaps two inches across on the scale of the shrunken people. I had them feel like balls of wool, too, for the hydrogen bonds that held the peptide chains in place should be quite flexible and resilient.

Then, too, the movie-makers forgot to consider that the thin cell membranes would not be thin at all to the shrunken people. At one point, one of the men must work his way out of the capillary and into the lung. In the movie, there's no particular problem in doing so. You just slice through the paper-thin membranes separating the two. — After all, membranes are only 1/10,000 of an inch thick.

Sure, but to the shrunken people, the membrane would be something like 40 yards thick on their scale. The plot made it necessary for the hero to cross that thickness, and I thought 40 yards was a bit much. I cheated and called it "several yards" in the book and let it go at that.

What's more, there was the matter of surface tension.

In the body of a quantity of liquid, each molecule is weakly attracted by all the other molecules. The attractions come from all directions and cancel each other out so that individual molecules move freely as though they are not being attracted at all.

At the surface of the liquid, a molecule is attracted only by other molecules within the liquid. The sparse scattering of air molecules outside the liquid has hardly any effect.

Molecules on the surface endure a net inward pull, therefore, and it takes an expenditure of energy for them to stay on the surface. For that reason, there is a tendency for the surface to be as small as possible. That is why small quantities of liquid, floating freely, assume a spherical shape. A sphere has the smallest possible area of surface for its volume. (A falling raindrop is "tear-shaped" because of air resistance.)

What's more, since all the surface molecules push inward as far as

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they can, they force themselves (so to speak) closer together, like people trying to push into a crowded subway car at the rush hour. To try to separate these crowded-together molecules takes more energy than trying to separate ordinary molecules in the body of the liquid. This extra clinging-together of surface molecules is spoken of as "surface tension," and it is as though the liquid had a very fragile skin covering its surface.

Tiny objects are not heavy enough to break that skin and small insects can go skittering over a water-surface, not because they are floating (if they were within the body of water, they would *not* rise to the top) but because they are supported by the surface-tension skin.

Well, now, if insects are light enough to be supported by surface tension, what about objects the size of our shrunken people? I didn't dare calculate what the surface tension of unshrunken liquids might seem to be to the shrunken people. I suspected it would be so great that my heroes simply couldn't break through the surface of the liquid blood into the air within the lung.

The necessities of the movie plot forced me to let him through, albeit I made him have difficulties. So far no one has written in to say that the surface tension would be an insuperable barrier.

To explain one last point, let's go back to the 19th Century, when there were indeed great scientists who, like Hollywood movie-makers, disbelieved in the existence of atoms. In the case of the scientists, it was not a matter of blissful ignorance, however, but of cogent thought.

The atomic theory had first been advanced in its modern form in 1803 by the English chemist, John Dalton, as a convenient way of explaining various chemical phenomena. Throughout the 19th Century, the concept of atoms had been more and more successful in explaining what went on inside the test-tube. By the end of the century, chemists were even making use of "structural formulas" for the more complicated molecules. Not only did they count the number of atoms of the various different kinds within a particular molecule; they even placed those atoms in specific arrangements in three dimensions, like a Tinker-toy structure.

Naturally, it was almost inevitable for chemists to believe that atoms really existed. If atoms did not exist how could their pretended existence explain so much so conveniently? How could matter behave *as though* it were atomic in so many ways and so thoroughly, if it were, in fact, *not* atomic?

Nevertheless, some scientists maintained it was not wise to stir be-

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yond the measurable phenomena. All the 19th Century knowledge of atoms was indirect. Atoms were too small to be seen or sensed in any direct way, and while they might be very useful as a model to focus thought, they might (it was felt) mislead scientists who too easily believed in their literal existence.

The last great scientist to argue in this way, the last to refuse to accept the literal existence of atoms, was the German physical chemist, Friedrich Wilhelm Ostwald. The 20th Century opened with Ostwald still vigorously maintaining the anti-atomic view.

Yet he changed his mind, at last, and here's how:

It began in 1827 with a Scottish botanist, Robert Brown. Brown was interested in pollen, and at one time he was studying a suspension of pollen grains in water under a low-power microscope. He found he had trouble focussing, for the grains jiggled. They did not move purposefully in a particular direction; they jiggled randomly all over the lot.

Brown realized that the pollen grains were alive, if dormant, and felt that the motion might be a kind of manifestation of life. However, he watched dye particles (indubitably non-living) of similar size when suspended in water and they jiggled about erratically, too. Anything that was small enough would jiggle in suspension, and the smaller it was, the more marked was the jiggling.

All that could be done at this time was to give the phenomenon a name, since explanation there was none. It was discovered by Brown, and it also involved the erratic motion of particles. Why not call it "Brownian motion" then?

In the 1860's, the Scottish physicist, James Clerk Maxwell, produced an impressive explanation of the properties of gases in terms of randomly moving particles, and for the first time, the atomic theory explained physical phenomena as well as chemical phenomena. At once the thought arose that randomly moving particles in a liquid might be shoving the larger particles in suspension this way and that.

In short, the grains of pollen or dye were being bombarded by water molecules and it might be that which was producing the Brownian motion.

Look at it this way— We ourselves are being bombarded from all sides by air molecules or, if we are in water, by water molecules. However, at any given moment, we are being struck by enormous numbers from all the different directions and the effect cancels itself out. We are struck by no more from one direction than from the opposite direction. It may be that a *few* more strike from the east than

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from the west, but the individual molecules are so tiny that the effect of a mere few out of the astronomical numbers available is immeasurably small. Of course, if a *lot* more strike from the east than from the west, we will feel the push, but the chance that a *lot* more will do so in the sheerly random motion of the molecules is also immeasurably small.

But consider our shrinking people (or shrinking anything). From their point of view the Universe is getting larger, and the molecules of air and water as well. Because they themselves get smaller, they present a smaller target to the bombarding molecules and fewer strike them in a given small instant of time. The individual molecules get larger and larger, too.

When our people reach the microscopic, they are being bombarded by BB-shot and not by many of them. *Now* if a few more strike from east than from west, it will be important and their tiny bodies will feel it. A preponderance from the east shoves them west, and in the next moment a preponderance from above will push then downward and so on.

The random bombardment by molecules would explain the motion in the first place, the erratic nature of the motion in the second, and the fact that the effect was more pronounced the smaller the floating object in the third.

Men like Ostwald were not impressed by this argument. It was just talk. To make it more than talk one ought to calculate the chances of imbalance in molecular bombardment and the size of the effects. In short, there would have to be a strict and rigorous mathematical analysis of Brownian motion that would explain it *quantitatively* in terms of the random bombardment of molecules.

Then in 1905, such an analysis was produced, and by none other than Albert Einstein.

According to his equation, particles suspended in a tall container of liquid ought to behave in response to a balance between the force of gravity and the effect of Brownian motion.

Gravity pulled downward and molecular motion kicked in all directions, including upward. If gravity were all that were involved, the particles would all settle to the bottom. If Brownian motion were all that were involved they would spread out evenly. In a combination of the two, they would spread out, but pile up more and more densely toward the bottom. The more massive the molecules, the greater the Brownian motion for objects of a particular size at a particular temperature and the smaller the extent to which they would crowd toward the bottom.

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Einstein was strictly a theoretician, however. He was satisfied to produce the equation, and he left it to others to check it against observable phenomena. The one who followed it up was a French physicist, Jean Baptiste Perrin. In 1908, he suspended small particles of gum resin in water and counted the number of particles at different levels. He found that the numbers increased as he worked downward exactly in accordance with Einstein's equation, provided the molecules of water were given a certain mass.

Not only had he verified Einstein's explanation of Brownian motion, but he was the first to work out a reasonably accurate measure of the actual weight of individual molecules.

Ostwald was now faced with an observable effect produced by individual molecules. By looking at suspended objects in water jiggling around, he could, in effect, see them being struck by individual molecules. That supplied his rigid requirement for direct observable evidence, and he could no longer deny the existence of atoms.

Perrin received the 1926 Nobel Prize in Physics for his work. (Einstein had gotten his, for other work, in 1921.)

This brings me back to "Fantastic Voyage." In the movie, the shrunken submarine moves through the bloodstream precisely as it would if it were of normal size moving through an ocean current. That would be so if there were no atoms or if atoms were infinitesimally small.

But there *are* atoms of size comparable to the shrunken ship. The ship ought therefore be jiggling from side to side, back and forth, up and down, and every direction in between, through the effect of Brownian motion. This would happen in even more pronounced fashion to the individual people on those occasions when they left the ship to swim around in the bloodstream.

I couldn't actually allow much Brownian motion in the novel. It would have introduced too many complications (bad sea-sickness for one thing). I did mention it, though, and allowed some jiggling at the start, just to show I knew it ought to be there; and then I ignored it.

All this may cause alarm and despondency in the hearts of some of my Gentle Readers who have felt the impulse to write science fiction and who now think it requires advanced degrees in science to do so. Don't think that for a moment. Good science fiction does not necessarily require all this folderol.

Despite all the errors, inconsistencies, and oversights in the movie

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"Fantastic Voyage," I thought it was a lot of fun, very suspenseful, fast-moving and delightful. The errors didn't bother me a bit while I was watching.

What's more, if someone else had written a novel based on the movie and had not bothered to correct any of the errors, it would still easily have made an exciting story.

It's just that, in my own case, I happened to know the errors were there and I had to correct them. It's my personal way of writing science fiction, and it's not the only way. Candor compels me to say that I consider my way the best way, but it's still not the only way.

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In New York City, labor contracts are not signed; they are hoisted, like hurricane warnings. We've learned how to live without teachers, cops, transit workers, elevator men; and how to live with garbage, lots of it. Is there anybody we've missed? Yes, shouts Pg Wyal in this reductio ad absurdum account of a strike to end all strikes. Mr. Wyal is a young writer (21), whose biographical "hints" say that he created himself out of nothing (the sheer nothing of S. California) through raw will power . . . came to New York in mistaken attempt to reach existential nirvana, only to bum snowy streets looking for love or nickels . . .

THE FREAK

by Pg Wyal

HE SET HIMSELF IMPOSSIBLE goals, so it's not surprising that he never achieved many of them. No, he only achieved about *half* of them—and that was bad enough.

Maybe, for just a quickly forgotten instant, you'd have wondered about the past and post of Hank the Skull. Maybe, as you blinked a twisted blink at his lopsided gaze, and dropped a guilty quarter into his wavering palm, you would have thought to ask his game and how he saw its rules. But then, shuddering in your bowels, you would pass quickly into the invisible morass of the crowd, your mind shaking like troubled water, your memories shifting to cover Hank the Skull up in feverish, desperate street impressions. His face evoked that sort of reaction, and that was just what he wanted. Anonymity gave him security. It was the loss of anonymity which brought about his final ruin.

At night, focusing eyes stuck in his head like steps, one fully two inches below the other, squinting down at the rainy streets, he navigated his way to the third-floor walkup where he lived. He screwed open the door with a two-fingered hand, and shuffled on six-toed feet into a large carpeted studio, wherein the furniture was soft and the air was warm. For a beggar, his quarters were rather better than you'd expect. He ate his meals (and they were the same

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bland meals you eat) from well-washed china in a clean kitchen, and afterward slept on a foam-mattress bed. Of his dreams, one dare not speculate.

And in the morning, quite naturally, Hank the Skull went out to beg. He did a tidy business.

Except on Wednesday nights.

Two days after the New Year, when winter lay white and barren on the ground (a time of cold suffering, and the need for cold mirth), at 9:00 PM, punctually, Hank made his way to a midtown loft, on the thirteenth floor of a seedy office building. Inside the loft there was a strange thing: rather than easels, naked women in ridiculous poses, small businesses attracting little income, loud machinery making unoiled noises, or guitars plugged into the electrical network of the city, there were twenty rows of twenty chairs each. The loft was a small auditorium, a meeting hall.

Facing the chairs was a small platform, upon which rested a lumpy stool and a low, wobbly podium. There usually was a glass and pitcher of water next to the podium, on a sway-backed little table.

Hank the Skull dropped his lumpy posterior down on the lumpy stool, and waited while an even two hundred people drifted into the room, skidding on wheelchairs and stumbling on peg-legs, skating in wheeled picnic baskets. His eyes, one kissing his cheek and the other slanting towards his fright-frazzled hair, roved appraisingly over the beings who seated themselves before him. Most carried signs, such pleas as, I AM BLIND—HELP ME GET A SEEING EYE POODLE; I AM SUFFERING FROM MYOPIA—HELP ME GET A PAIR OF PRESCRIPTION SUNGLASSES; I AM CONSTIPATED—HELP ME GET AN ENEMA. Some, rather more genuinely afflicted, hobbled in on their stumps playing a set of drums and strangling on their torn tongues. There were blind men and paraplegics, spastics and imbeciles, horse-headed sufferers of acromegaly, bone-thin hyperthyroid clowns, nervous and bug-eyed, potato-faced diabetics with open sores inflamed and necrotic on their legs, stinking like the bloated dead, and there were various limbless, broken bodies to fill the remainder of seats.

At 9:30 a banner was tacked to the wall behind the lectern: MUTUAL BROTHERHOOD OF STRANGE PEOPLE—LOCAL 334. And Hank thumped the gavel, bringing the meeting to order.

"Is there any old business?" he shouted in a voice like congealing tar. The room was quiet. "Is there any new business?" he demanded in a groan of paralyzed sound, the air molecules stuck together like a siamese catastrophe. The room remained quiet for a second, and

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then a gargoyle head bobbed up from the floor.

"You forgot to read the minutes."

"No minutes were taken at the last meeting. The secretary's hand was in the shop, and the clock was crippled," said Hank the Skull. "Is there any other new business?"

A basoon rasp from the far back row made the air shudder with subsonics. *"Da cost of livin' is goin' up an' I ain't gonna take any more!"* All eyes, and a few red-tipped canes, turned curiously around in their weird sockets; strange heads swiveled on eel and fish necks. Attention was blearily focused.

"Would the gentleman care to identify himself?" asked Hank. "And I'd like to remind everyone to at least *try* to articulate his complaints a little more clearly. And intelligently. We can't deal with the Management from a position of brute boorishness, you know."

The voice responded, *"Screw da management. Ya somkinda scab? We ain't gettin' enough dough. I says, let's* get *it!"*

Mumbles. Rumbles. The noises of a crowd absorbing a new, perhaps dangerous idea. There were a few squawks of petty outrage—the kind of sound a woman makes when she's forty and has just been pinched for the first time. There were grunts of, "Yeah," and, "About time somebody did something."

The chairman silenced them all. "We shall carry things out in a dignified, politic way, or not at all." His voice carried authority, and the man at the back of the room acknowledged it.

"I'm Lefty," continued the man, in a much subdued voice. He stood up. Someone, probably a pinhead, giggled. The speaker had two arms on his left side and none on his right. Both arms were large and otherwise perfectly formed, and when he gestured the arms moved together in perfect phase, doubly reinforcing the semaphore. "Now, maybe I ain't no whiz kid—I mean, nobody's gonna take me for Albert Einstein or nothin'. But it seems to me that we're not *doin'* what a Union is, like, supposed to *do.* I mean, what the hell are we here for if we can't get, like, no better workin' conditions or shorter hours on the street—and hardship pay, disability, and overtime?" He shifted his feet far apart, looking solid and aggressive. Now everyone was listening quietly. "So, like, since we ain't *got* none of them things—let's strike!"

Something in his crocodile voice and unbalanced stance took them all by surprise. Without thinking, everyone (everyone who could) broke into enthusiastic applause. The ones who couldn't applaud at least tried to clack their jaws to-

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gether or stomp their occasional feet on the rude wooden floor.

The chairman was hostile to the idea, at first. How, he demanded, could anyone possibly care if the beggars—the most unpleasant of the beggars—went on strike? Wouldn't the city just consider them a nuisance well gone?

"Nah!" replied Lefty, depreciating the chairman's hesitance with both his good left arms. "They *need* us. Baby, youse don't know it, but they're just as weird as we are—only, not so obvious. Do you think any normal human bein' can live in 'Funny City'? Man, if youse take forty million people and pile them all onto this tiny strip of flotsam, you are gonna have some pretty weird cases—about forty million of 'em!"

The audience bobbed its collective head up and down in agreement.

"Like," continued Lefty, talking fast, "what do youse think is so 'Funny'?"

Laughs.

"So I move that we go on strike until we get a better deal."

The chairman tried to stem the rushing tide, but you can stop the hopeful human spirit no more than the moon in its tracks, or the tide under the tracking moon. A formal motion was entered, and then debated. Since the enthusiasm was (except for Hank) unanimous (and even Hank became interested, excited, and at last favorable), the course of debate ran not so much about the merits of actually striking, but on the terms to be demanded.

One person raised her claw into the air and wanted to know, "Whom shall we bargain *with*? We have got to strike against something more tangible than just the *people*—though, basically, they're the ones we're really hurting."

The chairman found the question valid. It was decided, very quickly, that they would blame everything on the mayor and his "corrupt and double-dealing administration." That last clause would implicate everyone in the city government, which meant everyone in Greater Gothopolis—since, lately, the bureaucracy had swollen out like a great tumor to include every occupation, avocation, and hobby in the Humble Universe.

They ultimately agreed to demand a minimum hustle of 65¢—hoping against all rational hope for 50¢, after all the haggles had been haggled and all the papers had been patriotically mortified and incensed against both sides.

And Hank the Skull embraced the whole scheme like another man's wife.

Mayor Vachel Lindblad was not quite furious. Just angry.

"After all the City has done for them," he told the reporters, "they

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have decided upon a course contrary to the best interests of city and citizens alike. I consider this a rude and contemptuous slap at my personal trust. I am deeply hurt."

A brash reporter in long sideburns and a propeller-driven beany asked, "What effect do you think the Freak's Strike—or Freakout—will have on the city's economy?"

The mayor looked serious, and wrinkles creased deeply into his ordinarily unfurrowed brow. "I am afraid that the effect cannot be immediately calculated. There are so many variables, and many of these are naturally only going to appear after the effects have had time to 'settle', so to speak, that I don't think I can comment on this now. I would only like to request all citizens to cooperate with the government as fully as they can, and not to allow panic to ripple the smooth waters of administration." He grinned boyishly at his metaphor.

The reporters left and filed their stories. The strike had come without proper warning; everyone was shocked.

Except Hank the Skull, who was delighted.

"Mr. Mayor," said Hank, blinking unnervingly into the mayor's aristocratic countenance, "I am afraid the union cannot accept your latest offer. The members of the Brotherhood voted on the offer last night, and found it insufficient. They simply can't live on such poor wages."

"Why not? They did before!" snapped Mayor Lindblad, looking his forty-five years for once.

"Because," Hank said smoothly, "we are no longer willing to accept second-class citizen status. We are human beings—albeit a little warped—and we intend to be treated humanely. Take it or leave it."

". . . The City cannot allow itself to be played with. We are not without shame. We have forty million people living here, and they must be fairly and honestly represented. We shall not surrender to these unrealistic, ridiculous demands. The City and People of Gothopolis are not fools; we shall not allow bandits to rob us of our wealth and honor."

The strike had assumed the psychological tones of a duel, a minor battle. At stake was cold money and foolish vanity.

The game spiraled out of control.

FREAKOUT QUEERS CITY, cried the *News* like a violated girl.

BEDLAM IN FUNNY TOWN, raved the *Times* in a barely suppressed giggle.

COMMIES DUE IN '72, warned the San Diego *Worker*.

MAYOR URGES CALM, declared the *Realist*.

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It wasn't too bad at first. The admissions to mental hospitals went up somewhat. But that was a mere spitwad compared to the vast, emotional hurricane of bile-tart phlegm that began to lash out of the printing press's yellow drooling mandibles.

"Why stop now," said Hank the Skull, waving the *Gothopolis Times* in the air, "when we've got 'em running?"

And indeed, they were running, like emaciated lions after a lean, biped savannah killer. It was a chase unto death.

The people grew restless and cynical. When, it was asked, will this crazy thing end? Who gave the freaks the right to strike anyway? Why doesn't the mayor ask for the National Guard?

Slowly, over the first week, discontent mounted. Then, as the days blended into the fuzzy calendar-rows of the past, discontent turned to irritability. Weeks stretched into a month.

Garbage blew aimlessly on half empty streets. Men loitered around the little boys' room. Women painted themselves purple. Blank-faced children began to buy bubblegum just for the taste, neglecting to read the comix or blow the bubble. All the situation comedies received zero in the ratings. Insanity began to march in the thousand streets of the city like an invading army, ragged but triumphant.

A thought occurred at one union meeting, and it muted the gaiety somewhat: What if they don't need us anymore?—maybe they're spooky enough to provide their own madness!

So Hank let out a rumor that he was reaching a tentative agreement with the mayor. The press snapped up the rumor; editorials complimented both Mayor Lindblad and Hank the Skull for their "tenacity and courage." Millions sighed and relaxed. Things were looking fine.

But, no, said Hank, the mayor is still intractable. We couldn't agree on anything.

The cold, naked whispering of fear.

". . . And, I mean, it's been three whole months, and the city has had plenty of time—goddamn it, I gotta work or I'll starve." Lefty sat down surrounded by pale blue gloom. A bat fluttered down from the ceiling and sank its claws through the pad on his right shoulder. He felt nothing; there was nothing beneath the pad.

Hank the Skull sat on his stool in a dark megalomaniacal fury. Nobody must challenge his power. This Lefty character should be expelled from the Brotherhood, he thought, and clenched his two fingers in tight determination. His walleyed face screwed itself up into a complex matrix, like the

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un-symmetrical whorls and arcs of a fractured geometrical lathe.

"Look, Lefty, you're just being divisive. We've all got to present a common face to the City, or we'll lose everything. Other locals have taken up the cry—some even the cause. We stand in a very good position to really do something for the Strange People of the world. If we let our determination weaken now, the other locals will collapse like a row of dominoes blown over by a fart. Now, are you going to be a silly-milly, or are you going to behave in a rational, adult fashion?" His narrow skull flushed and throbbed like a beating, gruesome heart. Each of his distant, stepladder eyes pulsed in time to his skull, luminous cepheid suns in schizoid caves. The power was in him, and the blood swelled hot.

Lefty just sneered. "Who the hell is gonna fight your battles if he's dead from cold and hunger? We gotta eat."

The other members whispered in appreciation. But none dared argue with Hank. He held them mute. His charisma was brighter than the yellow bulbs that hung from the ceiling like garish flares on a fraying Damoclean tether.

"I think," said the mayor, lighting a marijuana cigar with his very expensive and impressive electric ruby-laser lighter, "I see a way home."

"Which way is that?" wondered his smooth young secretary.

"We offer to meet their offer." He put the lighter back in his well-tailored pocket with a polished wave of his manicured hand. The rings twinkled and sparkled.

"But, we already have met their offer—six times! They can get $1.75 per handout if they want. The people would never stand for it—but you could at least gracefully resign." The mayor was obsessed with being graceful. If he threw up, it was gracefully.

"Nevertheless," continued the mayor, "we must have our freaks back. The city will go insane without them. According to the computers—" he never did anything without goosing at least forty pages of statistics out of the Municipal Computers "—we have exactly one more week, and then —POWIE! The whole scene will look like the jackal's lunch."

His smooth, tawny secretary shuddered. "Nauseous. But, how can we, I mean, how can the *people* afford it!" She laughed harshly.

Mayor Lindblad dragged on his cigar. "Exactly the point, my dear. And that's both the crux and the cure of the problem." He grinned, white ceramic fangs in the fluorescent glow of power.

Hank studied his deformed hands. *Can I afford a manicure? No. Wouldn't look right.*

His secretary, a girl with beau-

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tiful gold hair—on her chin—sashayed in and sat down awkwardly on his limp lap. "Whazza matta, huhhnyylll?" She also had a cleft palate—it extended all the way to her skull sutures, leaving little room for brains.

"The matter is the matter." He dropped his receding chin on her soft shoulder and nuzzled her whiskers. "I can't seem to convince the union how important it is to present a unified front to the Enemy."

"Youll meean thu *may*orr. He ayn't soll balld. I think he's killnd ullf cullte."

The door was open. A fat, pale face leered in, hungry and anxious. "Can I just stand here a minute and look?" implored the face. "I haven't seen one of youse in so long . . ." The face sounded sad and wistful, almost lonely.

"*No!*" snapped Hank. "Get out!" The sad, plump face skulked away. Hank scowled after him. "Close the damn door," he growled at the girl. "And lock it. Good . . . now sit on my lap."

The secretary hesitated, blushed. "I can't," she garbled. "I always fall off. I don't like sitting on your lap. It's too . . . too uncomfortable." She stared at her dainty pigeon feet in flustered silence. *Why does he have to make these embarrassing scenes,* she wondered. *He wasn't like that before the strike.* "Oh, damn you!" she slurred, and ran out of the office, slamming the door smartly behind her.

Hank sat bewildered and hurt in his chair. She was a good secretary; why did she have to contradict him all the time? He had a feeling that she wouldn't return.

Hank leaned on the windowsill. The streets below were empty of all save a few derelicts; even the bums looked nervous, ready to commit suicide or hurl themselves into the snake pits. And all of it was due to Hank—his power over mind and economy. Without the emotional release of the freaks, the rejected, the odd and the awful, the sane human mind attempts to compensate by retreating into its own illusions, the waste bins of memory. Time seemed to stretch out ahead of Hank—time that would draw on itself for its own ends, time running on like a burbling sewer, into nowhere, for nothing. The people, made equal (in their own minds) to the monstrosities they preyed upon, felt time on them. Because they had time on them, they were unhappy, and their faces were black and frightened. Presently, their faces were not to be seen; the population stayed home in a sense of aimless dolor, going nowhere, doing nothing, hiding under the ceiling, playing tag with shadows, drinking beer until three in the morning and watching the TV commercials with delighted tears of gratitude.

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A horrible, ubiquitous quiet descended—the streets were as absolutely silent as the worm-deserted grave. Weeds sprang up in the plastic parks; the chrome tail-fins tarnished; industry ground its gears together in dismay and defeat, and screeched to a halt. The nervous center of a nation felt senility crawl prematurely into its synapses, and bit its collective fingernails in gibbering psychedelic pique. Hank held the world frozen in his eyes.

The telephone screamed; it would be the mayor, Hank knew. As he picked up the receiver and cuddled it against his tattered ear, the freak knew he had forced himself into a corner—and there would be no compromise.

"Tut," chided Mayor Lindblad. "Rome wasn't ruined in a day. You must consider all the alternatives."

"I have," said his deputy mayor, Franchelli Pierdlionni. "Death, starvation and mass suicide." He ticked off each word on his fingers, as if counting apocalyptic sheep. "Death to our industry and Image, starvation to our citizens, because of the Teamsters' sympathy strike, and mass suicide for the bureaucracy."

The mayor's thin blond eyebrows shot off his head and spattered on the ceiling. "That's anarchy! That's sedition! That's—" His fine patrician jaw dropped open and stayed that way. Slowly his smooth orator's tongue flowed regally out of his wide, firm mouth and slithered across his expensively shirted chest, which was deep and muscular.

"Mr. Mayor," said Pierdlionni deferentially, "are you going to puke or something? I can get a doctor—"

The mayor's composure snapped back together like a well-built machine, or the closing jaws of a guillotine. He straightened his tie in the time-immemorial gesture of swank assurance. "I'm fine. I just—look—we've got to do something about this 'Hank the Skull' creature."

"Issue a statement," suggested the deputy mayor.

"I think I already issued one. They never do any good, anyway."

"Nerve gas?"

Lindblad flashed ice-blue eyes at the deputy. "Never! We've got to take them alive."

"Maybe the National Guard?"

"Nonsense! To regain our stability, we need *freaks*—real horrors! And the ones we had were the best—worst—in the business. To restore public confidence, we need something at least as vile and warped. If they don't have someone to laugh at, they'll collapse. And dammit—I know, have known for days, that we can turn this to our advantage. If we could just get new freaks. . . ."

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"Mr. Mayor," said Pierdlionni, "back in Sicily, we—"

"Forget Sicily!" barked Lindblad, his composure deflated like an empty bladder.

The mayor was not his normal, stable self. The problem had obsessed him for three months, driven his mind into inescapable pathways of thought—avenues of speculation and logic from which his personality had begun to change to fit the problem which now engulfed his life. *Was* his life.

". . . Maybe if you went for walks, like you did in the Gutter Riots last summer—"

Walks! Image! Thoughts and pictures, trains of reasoning, flashed, whirled and melted together in the mayor's feverish brain. He saw what he needed.

"Pierdlionni—get me that doctor! Then get me the TV networks. Then—hell, I'll do it myself!" And he ran into the bright corridor.

The announcer's voice was smooth, oiled, calm and phony.

". . . And now—HERE'S VACHEL!"

Applause.

Close-up of the mayor. A half profile, grinning. Dressed in green and orange tights, with silver bells at the ankles, and a purple codpiece.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen of Gothopolis. You all know about the trouble we've had lately with our freaks. Since you're all so anxious to reach a suitable, ah, solution, I'm glad to be able to announce I have reached one."

Applause—of the same mechanical origin.

"There will be no settlement. Ever. None is needed."

Applause.

"Instead, we of the Greater Gothopolis Government, in cooperation with the Gotham State Love Bureau, have arranged to bring you this weekly television program."

Applause.

"I'm glad you are so pleased to hear this."

Full face shot. The mayor's left eye was where his left cheek should have been. It had been resituated. There was a faint scar in his forehead—where the eye used to be—where skin and bone had been sewed together and masked with thick makeup.

The mayor got off his stool. The camera allowed itself to drift down to his legs. The left leg was entirely missing—cut off at the hip. The right leg was amputated just above the knee. The little stump had a flat pad tied to its tip—or possibly stitched to the severed bone and sinews. The mayor bounced down on the pad and started to hop about.

"I think you'll find the show quite amusing—we've decided to emphasize the more humorous as-

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pects of government. We'll focus particularly—"

Pratfall.

"Ha ha! See what I mean? We'll focus particularly, tonight, upon intergovernmental rivalry—now let this ball represent the Department of Sanitation—" He picked up a baseball-sized red sphere. "And let this and this and this ball represent the Departments of Lotteries, Graft, and Parks. Now—" he threw a ball into the air "—this is how they look to your mayor!"

And he began to juggle the multicolored balls. On one leg. Without binocular vision.

"Ha ha ha! Isn't this fun!" said the mayor, a broken and derided figure. In close-ups, it could be seen that his head was subtly and interestingly deformed, his ears stuck out like flags, his teeth grew roots up, his hands lacked certain important fingers, his joints worked in an hilariously peculiar manner, his neck turned further than it should have, and his shoulders curved ungracefully around to a huge, sinewy hump. The overall impression was of a genetic-catastrophe clown.

"Ha ha! Ho ho!" laughed the popular mayor.

And all the people sighed, wept, and laughed at him.

Hank sat alone in the union hall, too lonely to hate. "Where are my goons?" he implored the echoing walls. "Where are my ugly supporters, my beloved Brothers?" Gone, all gone, vibrate the walls.

If Hank had had tearducts, he would have cried. Automation had cleansed the currents of the gutter, stifled the humiliated cries of the aimless. The city again functioned smoothly, like the huge and cruel machine it was, pausing once a week in unanimous relief and joy to watch the ruined figure of Vachel Lindblad dance crookedly, hop awkwardly, flop and fumble, drive tears into their eyes and fear out of their minds. Sanity closed around the city like a mother vulture's wings over her ugly brood.

Except, the ugliest of the city's children had been pushed out of the nest, to face a ruthless reality. They weren't needed anymore.

Hank stood as straight as he could. Hefting the sack over his low, hunched shoulders, he walked out of the deserted loft, rode the elevator thirteen floors down, and limped out into the endless frozen streets.

Hank the Skull, ignored by the cameras and scorned by the men of straight backs, crept away into the brown urban mist. ◄

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